JOHN MCCORMICK | ROD HAGUE | MARTIN HARROP

COMPARATIVE GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS

THIRTEENTH EDITION

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Brief Contents

PART 1: PRINCIPLES

1 Government and politics 2
2 Making comparisons 28
3 States and nations 54
4 Democratic rule 80
5 Authoritarian rule 106
6 Political culture 134

PART 2: INSTITUTIONS

7 Constitutions and courts 160
8 Executives 184
9 Legislatures 212
10 Bureaucracies 236
11 Sub-national government 262
12 The media 290

PART 3: PROCESSES

13 Political participation 320
14 Elections 346
15 Political parties 374
16 Interest groups 400
17 Public policy 426
18 Political economy 452

Detailed Contents

Illustrations and Features viii
Introduction xii
Acknowledgements xv
Changes to the Thirteenth Edition xvii
Guide to Learning Features xx
Guide to Spotlight Features xxii
Online Resources xxiii

PART 1: PRINCIPLES

1 Government and politics 2
Understanding government and politics 3
Why do we compare? 6
Government and governance 12
Politics, power, and authority 14
Regimes and political systems 19

2 Making comparisons 28
Understanding comparison 29
Origins and evolution 31
Choosing cases 36
Choosing methods 40
The challenges of comparison 44

3 States and nations 54
Understanding states 55
Origins and evolution 58
The diversity of states 64
Understanding nations 69
The future of the state 74

4 Democratic rule 80
Understanding democratic rule 81
Democratic regime types 84
Origins and evolution 87
Forms of democratic rule 93
Democracies and rights 98
The future of democratic rule 99

5 Authoritarian rule 106
Understanding authoritarian rule 107
Authoritarian regime types 108
Origins and evolution 113
Forms of authoritarian rule 116
The political impact of corruption 123
The future of authoritarian rule 126

6 Political culture 134
Understanding political culture 135
Elite culture and identity politics 137
From *The Civic Culture* to populism 140
Political trust 145
Political culture in authoritarian regimes 148

PART 2: INSTITUTIONS

7 Constitutions and courts 160
Understanding constitutions 161
Origins and evolution 163
The role of courts 167
The role of the judiciary 172
Constitutions and courts in authoritarian regimes 175

8 Executives 184
Understanding executives 185
Presidential executives 191
Parliamentary executives 193
Semi-presidential executives 199
Executives in authoritarian regimes 203

9 Legislatures 212
Understanding legislatures 213
Origins and evolution 216
The roles of legislatures 220
Representatives and their work 224

Legislatures in authoritarian regimes 228

10 Bureaucracies 236
Understanding bureaucracies 237
Origins and evolution 242
How bureaucracies are organized 246
How bureaucrats are recruited 250
Bureaucracies in authoritarian regimes 253

11 Sub-national government 262
Understanding sub-national government 263
Unitary systems 266
Federal systems 270
Local government 277
Sub-national government in authoritarian regimes 281

12 The media 290
Understanding the media 291
Origins and evolution 294
Comparing media freedom 300
Social media and the post-truth world 304
The media in authoritarian regimes 308

PART 3: PROCESSES

13 Political participation 320
Understanding political participation 321
Patterns of participation 323
Voting 330
Public opinion 333
Political participation in authoritarian regimes 335

14 Elections 346
Understanding elections 347
Legislative elections 350
Executive elections 356
Referendums and initiatives 358
Voter turnout 360
Elections in authoritarian regimes 365

15 Political parties 374
Understanding political parties 375
Origins and evolution 378
Party systems 382
Party organization 388
Political parties in authoritarian regimes 390

16 Interest groups 400
Understanding interest groups 401
Origins and evolution 403
Types and methods 407
The dynamics of interest groups 412
Interest groups in authoritarian regimes 417

17 Public policy 426
Understanding public policy 427
Models of the policy process 432
Comparing policy styles 435
Policy diffusion and convergence 438
Public policy in authoritarian regimes 442

18 Political economy 452
Understanding political economy 453
Origins and evolution 455
Comparative political economy 461
The welfare state 464
Political economy in authoritarian regimes 469

Bibliography 478
Index 496

Illustrations and Features

SPOTLIGHTS

1	Nigeria	26
2	Iran	52
3	European Union	78
4	India	104
5	China	132
6	Germany	156
7	South Africa	182
8	Brazil	210
9	United Kingdom	234
10	Japan	260
11	France	288
12	Venezuela	316
13	Russian Federation	344
14	United States	372
15	Mexico	398
16	Egypt	424
17	Sweden	450
18	Turkey	476

EXPLORING PROBLEMS

1	How can we take a global approach to comparison?	5
2	How can our comparisons be inclusive?	46
3	Come together, fall apart?	65
4	How can we improve the performance of democracy?	86
5	How can we contain authoritarianism?	129
6	How can we restore trust in government?	149
7	How can we ensure the independence of judges?	174
8	What is the most effective design for an executive?	197
9	How can we ensure that legislatures are representative?	222
10	How can we keep bureaucrats accountable?	241
11	What is the best way of organizing political communities?	275
12	How can we protect ourselves from false news?	306
13	How can we meet the challenge of the mis/uninformed citizen?	336
14	Should voting be mandatory?	364
15	What is the ideal number of political parties?	387
16	How can interest groups be heard?	413
17	How can we improve the quality of public policies?	436
18	Is economic equality possible?	465

USING THEORY

1	Theory and comparison	10
2	Modernization	34
3	Interpretivism	59
4	Democratization	89
5	Autocratization	114
6	Cultural theory	141
7	Institutionalism	168
8	Leadership theories	187
9	Elite theory	226
10	Feminism	252
11	Systems theory	267
12	Media theories	295
13	Rational choice	328
14	Behaviouralism	348
15	Political ideology	380
16	Pluralism	405
17	Structuralism	430
18	Class theory	460

FIGURES

1.1 The sub-fields of political science 4
1.2 The benefits of comparison 7
1.3 Comparing education spending and literacy rates 11
2.1 Population and the size of legislatures 42
2.2 The KOF Globalization Index 49
3.1 Elements of a state 56
3.2 The roles of states 57
3.3 The formation of states 62
3.4 The size of states 66
3.5 Comparing views about immigration 73
4.1 Features of democratic rule 83
4.2 Huntington's waves of democratization 88
4.3 Expansion of the British electorate 88
4.4 Stages of democratization 90
4.5 Global trends in democracy 100
5.1 Features of authoritarian rule 107
5.2 Tools of authoritarianism 112
5.3 Countries with the longest-serving political leaders 119
5.4 Military coups by region, 1950–22 123
5.5 The population of democratic and authoritarian regimes 127
6.1 Features of political culture 135
6.2 Views about government services in the United States 136
6.3 Support for populist parties in Europe 144
6.4 Is life better or worse than 50 years ago? 144
6.5 Comparing trust in government 146
6.6 Trust in government in the United States 148
6.7 African corruption compared 153
7.1 Elements of constitutions 161
7.2 Constitutions in democratic regimes 162
7.3 Why new constitutions are written 164
7.4 Constitutions in authoritarian regimes 176
7.5 The Human Freedom Index 180
8.1 Executives in democratic regimes 186
8.2 Executives in authoritarian regimes 203
9.1 Comparing levels of trust in European legislatures 214
9.2 Examples of lower chambers 217
9.3 Selecting the upper chamber 218
9.4 Legislatures in democratic regimes 220
9.5 Models of representation 225
9.6 Comparing the number of women in legislatures 227
9.7 Legislatures in authoritarian regimes 230
10.1 Bureaucracies in democratic regimes 237
10.2 Comparing government effectiveness 239
10.3 Weber's model of bureaucracy 242
10.4 Comparing the size of bureaucracies 245
10.5 Comparing e-government 246
10.6 Women in the bureaucracy and the labour force 251
10.7 Bureaucracies in authoritarian regimes 253
10.8 Changes in the effectiveness of government 254
11.1 Sub-national government in democratic regimes 264
11.2 Multi-level governance in the European Union 265
11.3 Sub-national government in authoritarian regimes 283
12.1 The media in democratic regimes 292
12.2 Mechanisms of media impact 292
12.3 Internet use: the urban–rural divide 299
12.4 The changing state of press freedom 301
12.5 Comparing levels of trust in the media 304
12.6 Internet freedom compared 308
12.7 Media freedom compared 309
12.8 The media in authoritarian regimes 310
13.1 Participation in democratic regimes 323
13.2 Comparing levels of political participation 324
13.3 Degrees of participation in democratic regimes 325
13.4 Voter turnout by gender in the United States 329
13.5 Voter turnout by gender in India 329
13.6 Influences on voter choice 330
13.7 Participation in authoritarian regimes 338
13.8 Internet use: the democratic–authoritarian divide 338

14.1 Elections in democratic regimes 347
14.2 How to rig an election 349
14.3 Electoral systems 351
14.4 The Canadian federal election, 2021 352
14.5 The use of referendums 359
14.6 Comparing voter turnout 361
14.7 Comparing trends in voter turnout 362
14.8 Elections in authoritarian regimes 366
14.9 Voter turnout trends in Egypt 367
15.1 Political parties in democratic regimes 375
15.2 Partisan dealignment in Sweden 377
15.3 Causes of partisan dealignment 377
15.4 Major ideologies: six examples 381
15.5 Political parties in authoritarian regimes 391
15.6 Trends in Russian legislative elections 393
16.1 Interest groups in democratic regimes 401
16.2 Iron triangles: the case of the United States 411
16.3 Comparing union membership 414
16.4 Interest groups in authoritarian regimes 419
17.1 Stages in the policy cycle 428
17.2 The diffusion of innovation 439
18.1 Economic Freedom of the World 456
18.2 Five perspectives on political economy 461
18.3 Comparing levels of inequality 466
18.4 Comparing welfare spending 467

TABLES

0.1 Spotlight cases xiv
1.1 The institutions of government 13
1.2 Three dimensions of power 17
1.3 Comparing political rankings 22
1.4 Comparing economies 23
2.1 Theories used in comparative politics 31
2.2 Types of case study 39
2.3 Comparative political research methods 41
2.4 The challenges of comparison 44
3.1 States by income 67
3.2 Ten criticisms of the state 75
3.3 The Fragile States Index 76
4.1 Democratic regime types 85
4.2 Forms of democratic rule 93
5.1 Authoritarian regime types 109
5.2 Forms of authoritarian rule 117
5.3 Communist party states 121
7.1 Comparing constitutional amendments 166
7.2 Comparing supreme courts and constitutional courts 170
7.3 Comparing judicial appointments 173
8.1 Selecting heads of state in parliamentary systems 188
8.2 Female executives (selected) 190
8.3 The presidential executive 191
8.4 Term limits on presidential executives 193
8.5 The parliamentary executive 194
8.6 Models of parliamentary government 196
8.7 The semi-presidential executive 199
8.8 Comparing executives 202
9.1 Comparing upper chambers 219
10.1 Divisions and agencies in the Australian Department of Home Affairs 248
11.1 Four tiers of government 266
11.2 Comparing regional government in unitary states 270
11.3 The world's federations 272
11.4 The structures of local government 279
11.5 Levels of government in China 282
12.1 The evolution of mass media 296
12.2 Forms of social media 298
12.3 The internet and the Arab Spring 312
13.1 Forms of political participation 322
14.1 Legislative electoral systems 350
14.2 The German federal election, 2021 355
14.3 The French presidential election, 2002 357
14.4 Presidential election systems 358
14.5 A recipe for higher voter turnout 363
14.6 Countries with mandatory voting 365
15.1 Comparing party systems 383
15.2 Europe's major party families 386
16.1 Social movements: some examples 403
16.2 Non-governmental organizations around the world 407
16.3 Types of interest groups 407
16.4 Channels of interest group influence 410

16.5 Comparing civic spaces 418
16.6 Social organizations in China 420
17.1 Three models of policymaking 432
17.2 Comparing policy styles 437
17.3 Mechanisms of policy convergence 440
17.4 The Ease of Doing Business index 441
17.5 Comparing policy in democratic and authoritarian regimes 444
18.1 Forms of welfare 467
18.2 Comparing the welfare state in Australia and Finland 468

MAPS

0.1 Spotlight cases xiv
1.1 The Human Development Index 24
3.1 States of the world 58
3.2 The Soviet successor states 63
3.3 The contested borders of Somalia 69
3.4 The stateless Kurds 72
4.1 Full and flawed democracies 85
5.1 Hybrid and authoritarian regimes 110
5.2 Corruption around the world 125
8.1 Executive types 198
11.1 The world's federations 271
11.2 The regions of Belgium 273
11.3 Changes in the borders of Nigerian states 274
11.4 The provinces of South Africa 277
11.5 The cities of Australia 281
12.1 Media freedom around the world 300
16.1 The global state of civil society 418

Introduction

In London, Washington DC, and the Swedish city of Gothenburg, researchers keep a close eye on the state of global democracy, and what they have found in recent years has them concerned. They have found a steady drop in the number of democracies worldwide, in the quality of representative government in many democracies, and in the trust held by many citizens in their governments. Almost everywhere, it seems, citizens are urging reforms in government aimed at making it more responsive and efficient, but leaders are often tightening their grip on power. The findings are similar for all three sets of researchers: those at the Economist Intelligence Unit in London who produce the annual Democracy Index, those at Freedom House in Washington DC who produce the annual *Freedom in the World* report, and those at the V-Dem Institute at the University of Gothenburg who produce the annual Democracy Report. They have found a decline in the number of free and fair elections, new challenges to civil liberties, and a rise in the number of people living under authoritarian government.

Why is all this happening, and what does it mean? Why is democracy under threat in so many different situations? Are these developments unusual, or are they part of wider trends around the world? How do the powers of different governments explain their actions, and how do their citizens feel about the changes they see? Does the structure of different political systems matter? Why are some countries ruled by a president and others by a prime minister? Why do some countries have a single dominant political party while others have dozens? What role do courts and judges play in these trends?

These are the kinds of questions addressed and answered by comparative politics. As well as helping us identify the rules of government and politics, comparison also helps us make sense of political news from around the world: as advances in technology, trade, and science bring us all closer together, so developments in one part of the world can have effects on many others, making it more important that we understand the changes we see. By studying different governments and political systems, we can better understand not just the country in which we live, but also other countries, their governments, their political decisions, and their people.

This is a book designed to introduce you to the study of comparative government and politics. It is written to meet the needs of students in different countries, approaching the study of government and politics from different perspectives. You may be using it as part of the first (and perhaps only) course or module you are taking on government and politics, as part of a course you are required to take outside your major subject, as part of a course you are taking

simply because you are interested in politics, or as part of a course you are taking in your major course of study. Whatever your background and motivation, the chapters that follow are designed to help you find your way through the many different forms in which politics and government exists around the world.

The book takes a thematic approach to comparison, with chapters divided into three broad groups.

- The first group (Chapters 1–6) provides the foundations, with a review of the key concepts in comparative politics, followed by chapters on the methods of comparison, on the reach of states and nations, on the features of democratic and authoritarian regimes, and on political culture in its different forms.
- The second group (Chapters 7–12) focuses on the key institutions of government, which constitute the core subject matter of political science. It opens with a chapter on the constitutions that help us make sense of how institutions work and relate to one another, and of the supporting work of courts. This is followed by chapters on executives, legislatures, bureaucracies, sub-national government, and the media.
- The third group (Chapters 13–18) looks at political processes, beginning with a survey of political participation, then looking at elections, parties, and interest groups, wrapping up with chapters on public policy and political economy.

The goal of the chapters that follow is to provide a wide-ranging and accessible guide for courses and modules in this fascinating and essential sub-field of political science. We will look at the methods and theories of comparison, at the differences between democracies and dictatorships, at the many intriguing forms in which the institutions of government exist, and at the ways in which ordinary people take part – or are prevented from taking part – in government and in shaping the decisions that affect their lives. Although the emphasis is on institutions and processes, we will also see how institutions matter for those who study such topics as civil war, revolutions, terrorism, corruption, nationalism, populism, ethnic and identity politics, religion and politics, ideologies, and the politics of development, among many others.

We will examine not just the structure of political systems and the ways in which citizens relate to them, but we will look also at the ebb and flow of democracy and authoritarianism, of nationalism and globalization, and of conflict and cooperation. We will look at what countries do well, what they do badly, how they might improve, and what they can learn from each other. The book is sprinkled with comparative data that not only shows how different countries are performing on a wide range of measures, but also gives us insight into the causes of the successes, and can help us identify the responses to the problems. Examples are given from nearly 90 countries in every part of the world, with a focus on 18 Spotlight countries chosen for their political and geographical variety (see Table 0.1 and Map 0.1).

Table 0.1: Spotlight cases

Full democracies	Flawed democracies	Hybrid regimes	Authoritarian regimes
France	Brazil	Mexico	China
Germany	India	Nigeria	Egypt
Japan	South Africa	Turkey	Iran
Sweden	USA	**Not classified**	Russia
UK		European Union	Venezuela

Map 0.1 Spotlight cases

Consider, as a sampler dish, this list of possibilities that have already been tried in multiple countries with encouraging results:

- Gender quotas that have helped increase the number of women elected to political office in Rwanda and Mexico.
- Compulsory voting that has improved voter turnout in Australia and Brazil.
- Proportional voting systems that have improved the accuracy of representation in Germany and Sweden.
- Generous welfare systems that have made life better for workers and retirees in Norway and Switzerland.
- Laws aimed at protecting freedom of the press in Costa Rica and Jamaica.
- Private–public partnerships that have averted corruption in Botswana and Mongolia.

- Professionalism and high salaries that have improved bureaucratic performance in Singapore and France.
- Outsourcing and restructuring that have helped make bureaucracy smaller and more efficient in New Zealand and the UK.

On the darker side of politics, we will also be looking at the ways in which dictators achieve and build power. We will see how they build and maintain networks of supporters, manipulate elections, stamp out dissent, control the media, extend their terms in office, limit civil liberties, engineer (or even ignore) constitutions, divide societies, promote corruption, and exclude their opponents, using intimidation and even violence. Authoritarianism has been much more common throughout history than democracy, and unfortunately we are now seeing its resurgence in many parts of the world. We will try to understand why this is happening and what can be done to reverse recent trends.

Despite those trends, it is important to realize that life in many ways is far better today than it was even a generation ago. On average, most of us live longer, healthier, and more productive lives thanks to remarkable advances in science, technology, and democratic ideals. At the same time, governments – and we as citizens – are perfectly capable of exploring and resolving the problems we face: we have the creativity, the resources, the institutions, and the political processes needed to make the necessary changes, if we decide to make them. As a critical step in that direction, though, it is important to understand how governments work, and to compare the performance of governments around the world, establishing where they have done well and where not so well.

It is through the process of comparing government and politics that we can not only understand how government works, but also better understand the problems we face and the possible solutions. The story that is told is one of drama and consequence, of changing needs and demands, and of a cast of heroes and villains whose efforts to govern can sometimes inspire and at other times infuriate. At few times in history have the changes been as intense and as rapidly moving as they are today. At few times in history, though, are the possibilities greater, or the lessons to be learned from comparison more valuable and urgent.

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Rod Hague and Martin Harrop were senior lecturers in politics at the University of Newcastle, UK. John McCormick is Emeritus Professor of political science at Indiana University Indianapolis in the United States. Among his publications are *Cases in Comparative Government and Politics* (2019), *Understanding the European Union* (8th edition, 2021), and *Introduction to Global Studies* (3rd edition, 2025).

Changes to the Thirteenth Edition

It has only been three years since the last edition of *Comparative Government and Politics* was published, and yet much has changed in the world during that time, not least being the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the war between Israel and Hamas, and a host of elections around the world, with often important consequences. This new edition is an opportunity to reflect on those changes, while also remaining true to the core purpose of earlier editions: to provide an introductory survey of comparative politics, while integrating some fresh perspectives on the study of the topic. As before, this book – above all – is an introduction, and assumes no prior knowledge about the subject, and continues to be designed for the needs of students either coming new to topic, or returning in search of a broad-ranging study of the topic.

Since John McCormick became a co-author with the tenth edition in 2016, he has had three main objectives: to continue building on the well-deserved reputation of the book created by Rod Hague and Martin Harrop, to change the focus from a comparative introduction to political science to an introduction to comparative politics, and to ensure the widest possible coverage of the field. These goals continue to drive this new edition, using all the latest data and drawing off the latest and most important scholarship.

Length. The phenomenon of textbooks that expand with each edition is well known, but *Comparative Government and Politics* remains one of the notable exceptions. Although some chapters are slightly longer than in the last edition, the overall length of this new edition is about the same as the last.

Classification of political systems. The tenth edition saw the introduction of the Democracy Index and the Freedom House ranking *Freedom in the World*. This dual system of classification has continued to be expanded, with more examples used in the body of the text to illustrate the features of both systems.

Sources. As discussed in *Exploring Problems 1* and *Using Theory 10*, much of the research in political science is published in English by publishers based in Europe and the United States, and the scholarship has long been dominated by the work of men. Imbalances of this kind have the effect of producing a lopsided view of the world. As always, great care has been taken in this new edition to use the most recent scholarship and the most diverse possible community of scholars and sources.

Chapter changes. Numerous structural changes have been made to recent editions of this book, including a reorganization of chapters, the addition of new pedagogical features, the expansion of coverage of authoritarian regimes, and more effort to make the structure of chapters more similar. With a workable balance achieved in the last edition, there have been few structural changes to

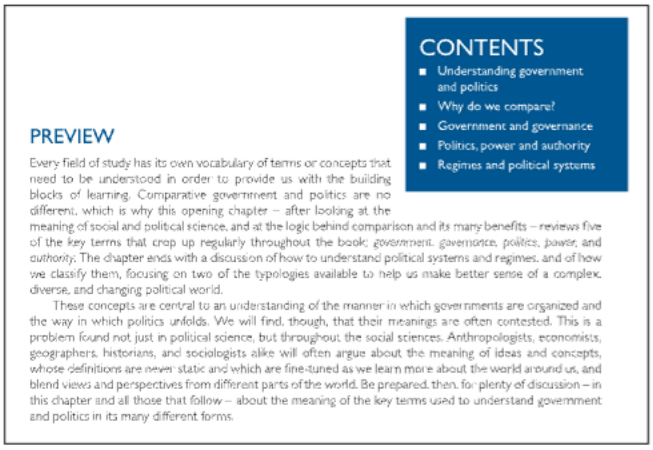
this new edition, beyond moving the chapter on political culture to the end of Part 1 in order to improve the logic of the progression of the chapters, and the movement of Spotlights to the end of chapters in order to improve their flow.

Some of the more specific changes include the following:

- *Introduction*: This is new, replacing the Preface in the last edition and providing more context on the topic and the challenges of comparative politics, and the goals of this book.
- *Chapter 1* (Concepts): New cases have been added to illustrate concepts, and discussion of the benefits of comparison has been expanded.
- *Chapter 2* (Methods): This was a new chapter in the last edition. In this edition, arguments and cases have been expanded and developed, with more on qualitative methods.
- *Chapter 3* (States and nations): New cases have been added, along with expanded discussion of nationalism and the differences among states.
- *Chapter 4* (Democratic rule): This has been moved up one chapter, and includes analysis on recent developments in the health of democracy.
- *Chapter 5* (Authoritarian rule): This has been moved up one chapter, and includes updated analysis on the expansion of authoritarianism.
- *Chapter 6* (Political culture): This has been moved back two chapters, and includes expanded analysis of populism and the reasons behind declining political trust.
- *Chapter 7* (Constitutions and courts): New cases have been added, along with recent court rulings with important constitutional implications.
- *Chapter 8* (Executives): More details on the features of executive types, new section and box added on term limits, and map on executive types improved.
- *Chapter 9* (Legislatures): Section on origins and evolution moved to earlier point in chapter and combined with discussion on the number of chambers. Coverage of roles of legislatures moved to later in chapter. New section added on censure motions.
- *Chapter 10* (Bureaucracies): Discussion of bureaucracies in authoritarian regimes expanded, including new figure summarizing their features.
- *Chapter 11* (Sub-national government): Discussion of unitary systems and of local government have been expanded, a new map added on Nigerian states, and a new table added on levels of government in China.
- *Chapter 12* (The media): Expanded section on media freedom (including a new figure on the changing state of press freedom), and a new section added on artificial intelligence.
- *Chapter 13* (Political participation): Reworked figure on participation in democratic regimes, new figure and text comparing levels of participation, new figure and text on voter turnout by gender in India, and new figure on participation in authoritarian regimes.

- *Chapter 14* (Elections): New clarity and details on different electoral systems, and more discussion added about how to understand voter turnout.
- *Chapter 15* (Political parties): New clarity and details on different party systems, allowing for recent developments in democratic and authoritarian regimes.
- *Chapter 16* (Interest groups): More detail given on the types and methods of groups, and new analysis added of the plight of civil society in authoritarian regimes.
- *Chapter 17* (Public policy): More detail given on policy models, with an expanded section on public policy in authoritarian regimes.
- *Chapter 18* (Political economy): A new figure and text on levels of economic inequality added, along with expanded discussion on political economy in authoritarian regimes.

Guide to Learning Features



CONTENTS

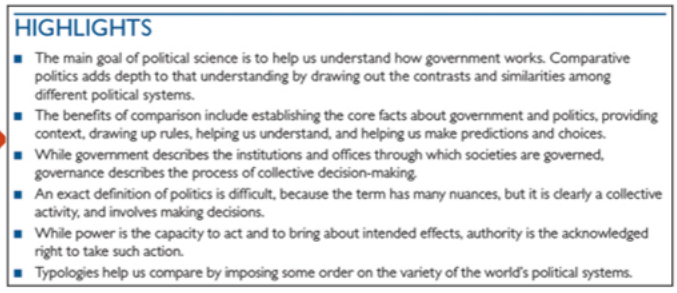
- Understanding government and politics
- Why do we compare?
- Government and governance
- Politics, power and authority
- Regimes and political systems

PREVIEW

Every field of study has its own vocabulary of terms or concepts that need to be understood in order to provide us with the building blocks of learning. Comparative government and politics are no different, which is why this opening chapter – after looking at the meaning of social and political science, and at the logic behind comparison and its many benefits – reviews five of the key terms that crop up regularly throughout the book: *government*, *governance*, *politics*, *power*, and *authority*. The chapter ends with a discussion of how to understand political systems and regimes, and of how we classify them, focusing on two of the typologies available to help us make better sense of a complex, diverse, and changing political world.

These concepts are central to an understanding of the manner in which governments are organized and the way in which politics unfolds. We will find, though, that their meanings are often contested. This is a problem found not just in political science, but throughout the social sciences. Anthropologists, economists, geographers, historians, and sociologists alike will often argue about the meaning of ideas and concepts, whose definitions are never static and which are fine-tuned as we learn more about the world around us, and blend views and perspectives from different parts of the world. Be prepared, then, for plenty of discussion – in this chapter and all those that follow – about the meaning of the key terms used to understand government and politics in its many different forms.

Preview Each chapter begins with a short outline of the contents of the chapter, designed as a preview of what to expect in the pages that follow.



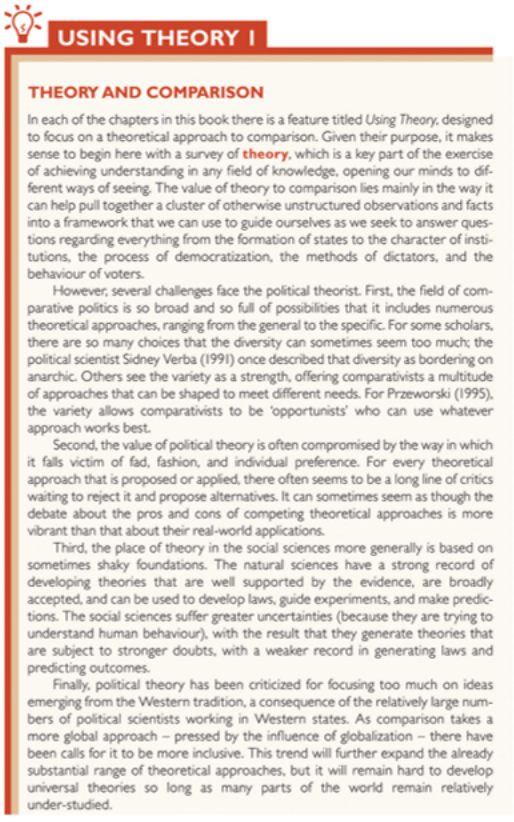
HIGHLIGHTS

- The main goal of political science is to help us understand how government works. Comparative politics adds depth to that understanding by drawing out the contrasts and similarities among different political systems.
- The benefits of comparison include establishing the core facts about government and politics, providing context, drawing up rules, helping us understand, and helping us make predictions and choices.
- While government describes the institutions and offices through which societies are governed, governance describes the process of collective decision-making.
- An exact definition of politics is difficult, because the term has many nuances, but it is clearly a collective activity, and involves making decisions.
- While power is the capacity to act and to bring about intended effects, authority is the acknowledged right to take such action.
- Typologies help us compare by imposing some order on the variety of the world's political systems.

Highlights Each chapter begins with six key arguments, chosen to underline some of the more important points made in the chapter.

Political science:
The study of the theory and practice of government and politics, focusing on the structure and dynamics of institutions, political processes, and political behaviour.

Marginal definitions The first time a key term is used it appears in boldface and is defined in a marginal box. The definitions are kept as brief and clear as possible, and each term is listed at the end of the chapter in which it is defined.



USING THEORY I

THEORY AND COMPARISON

In each of the chapters in this book there is a feature titled *Using Theory*, designed to focus on a theoretical approach to comparison. Given their purpose, it makes sense to begin here with a survey of **theory**, which is a key part of the exercise of achieving understanding in any field of knowledge, opening our minds to different ways of seeing. The value of theory to comparison lies mainly in the way it can help pull together a cluster of otherwise unstructured observations and facts into a framework that we can use to guide ourselves as we seek to answer questions regarding everything from the formation of states to the character of institutions, the process of democratization, the methods of dictators, and the behaviour of voters.

However, several challenges face the political theorist. First, the field of comparative politics is so broad and so full of possibilities that it includes numerous theoretical approaches, ranging from the general to the specific. For some scholars, there are so many choices that the diversity can sometimes seem too much; the political scientist Sidney Verba (1991) once described that diversity as bordering on anarchic. Others see the variety as a strength, offering comparativists a multitude of approaches that can be shaped to meet different needs. For Przeworski (1995), the variety allows comparativists to be 'opportunists' who can use whatever approach works best.

Second, the value of political theory is often compromised by the way in which it falls victim of fad, fashion, and individual preference. For every theoretical approach that is proposed or applied, there often seems to be a long line of critics waiting to reject it and propose alternatives. It can sometimes seem as though the debate about the pros and cons of competing theoretical approaches is more vibrant than that about their real-world applications.

Third, the place of theory in the social sciences more generally is based on sometimes shaky foundations. The natural sciences have a strong record of developing theories that are well supported by the evidence, are broadly accepted, and can be used to develop laws, guide experiments, and make predictions. The social sciences suffer greater uncertainties (because they are trying to understand human behaviour), with the result that they generate theories that are subject to stronger doubts, with a weaker record in generating laws and predicting outcomes.

Finally, political theory has been criticized for focusing too much on ideas emerging from the Western tradition, a consequence of the relatively large numbers of political scientists working in Western states. As comparison takes a more global approach – pressed by the influence of globalization – there have been calls for it to be more inclusive. This trend will further expand the already substantial range of theoretical approaches, but it will remain hard to develop universal theories so long as many parts of the world remain relatively under-studied.

Using Theory Every chapter includes a feature that focuses on one of the major theories used in comparative politics.

Exploring Problems Every chapter includes a feature that focuses on a problem in government and politics and poses questions about how comparison gives us insight into possible solutions.

EXPLORING PROBLEMS 1

HOW CAN WE TAKE A GLOBAL APPROACH TO COMPARISON?

In each of the chapters in this book there is a feature titled *Exploring Problems*, designed to focus on some of the practical problems of government, and to pose questions about how we can address and understand them comparatively. We will look, for example, at the problems of declining trust in government, of unbalanced representation in legislatures, and of the threat posed by false news. Here, in the first of these features, we deal with the question of how to take a global approach to comparison. In other words, how do we work around the practical problem of the unequal amounts of information we have available on the nearly 200 different countries of the world?

Even a quick online search, or a glance along library shelves, or a scan through this book, will reveal that some countries are more deeply studied than others, and that language stands as a potent barrier to equality. In English, for example, there is a vast body of information and of scholarly study available on government and politics in Western Europe and the United States, in part because they are home to so many of the scholars of comparative politics, and in part because they are the two academic and publishing giants of the world. There is also a large body of information and scholarly study on countries that European- and American-based scholars find particularly interesting, including China, France, Germany, India, Japan, Mexico, Nigeria, and Russia.

By contrast, less has been written and published in English on smaller European states, on English-speaking countries with smaller populations (such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand), on most Latin American and sub-Saharan African states (except those, such as Nigeria, with a significant native or expatriate community of scholars), or on smaller Asian states. There has also been relatively little published about the authoritarian regimes of the world, in part because relatively little data is available on these countries, and in part because it can be hard to ask questions in these countries and to receive honest or accurate answers. In some, such as North Korea and Syria, it is almost impossible to undertake field research.

In short, the body of information and understanding about government and politics around the world is unequal, making it harder to draw universal conclusions. How should we address this problem?

- Should we reduce our reliance on the work of academic scholars, and make more use of reliable media outlets and the reports of international organizations for information about the less-deeply studied countries?
- To what degree can we rely on such sources for the analysis and context that we need to make consistent comparisons?
- Will such sources give us a similar base of information upon which to undertake our comparison, or will the results end up being skewed?

Figures A wide range of figures is used throughout the book to provide visual support to topics covered in the body of the text, or to summarize lists of subjects covered in the text.

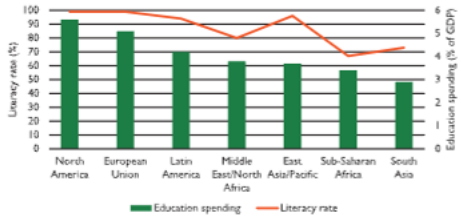


Figure 1.3 Comparing education spending and literacy rates
Source: Based on World Bank (2024). Data are for 2021.

Table 1.1: The institutions of government

Institution	Role and purpose	Examples
Executive	Governing, making policy, providing leadership and direction.	Presidents, prime ministers, ministers, cabinets.
Legislature	Representing the interests of citizens; making law; forming governments.	Parliaments, Congresses, National Assemblies, Diets.
Judiciary and courts	Upholding and interpreting the constitution.	Supreme courts, constitutional courts.
Bureaucracy	Implementing policy.	Departments, ministries, divisions, agencies.
Political parties	Offering policy alternatives, fielding candidates, forming governments and oppositions.	Conservatives, liberals, socialists, greens, nationalists.

Tables These display statistics or key features of a topic in the nearby text, or summarize subjects covered in the text.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Is it fair to describe comparison as 'the methodological core of the scientific study of politics'?
- Can we truly understand government and politics without comparison?
- Which is the most important of the benefits of comparative government and politics?
- Where does politics begin and end?
- Who has power, who does not, and how do we know?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Democracy Index and Freedom in the World as means of classifying political systems?

Discussion questions Each chapter closes with a set of six open-ended discussion questions, designed to consolidate knowledge by highlighting major issues and to spark classroom discussions and research projects.

FURTHER READING

Boix, Carles, and Susan C. Stokes (eds) (2007) *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics* (Oxford University Press). Although more than 1,000 pages in length, this is a rich survey of the many different dimensions of comparative politics.

Collander, David C., and Elgin F. Hunt (2022) *Social Science: An Introduction to the Study of Society*, 18th edn (Routledge). An introduction to social science, and to its methods and goals, with examples from all over the world.

Dogan, Mattei, and Dominique Pelassy (1990) *How to Compare Nations: Strategies in Comparative Politics*, 2nd edn (Chatham House). Although published many years ago, the arguments made in this short and readable book are still relevant.

Garner, Robert, Peter Ferdinand, and Stephanie Lawson (2023) *Introduction to Politics*, 5th edn (Oxford University Press). A general survey of politics, with sections on key concepts, comparative politics, and global politics.

Heywood, Andrew (2019) Politics, 5th edn (Bloomsbury). Another survey of politics, with chapters on ideas, institutions and processes.

Kendall-Taylor, Andrea, Natasha Lindstaedt, and Erica Frantz (2019) *Democracies and Authoritarian Regimes* (Oxford University Press). A survey of the features of democracies, dictatorships and autocracies, and the challenges faced by democracy.

Further reading An annotated list of six suggested readings is included at the end of each chapter, with an emphasis on the most recent and helpful surveys of the topics covered in that chapter.

Guide to Spotlight Features

These focus on the 18 country cases from which examples are most often quoted in the body of the text. They include a brief profile of each country (or regional organization, in the case of the European Union), brief descriptions of their political features, some key demographic and economic data, their political and development rankings, and a short case study of each country in the context of the topic of the chapter in which the Spotlight appears.

Profile	**A brief profile of the country, in 150 words or less, summarizing its key political features.**
Form of government	A general description of the form of a government, including dates on state formation and the adoption of the most recent constitution.
Executive	Form and structure of the executive.
Legislature	Form and structure of the legislature.
Judiciary	Form and structure of the judicial system.
Electoral system	Form and structure of the electoral system.
Parties	Outline of the party system and the major parties at work in the country.
Population	Data for 2022 from World Bank (2024).
Gross Domestic Product	Total value of goods and services produced by a country, in US dollars. Data for 2022 from World Bank (2024).
Per capita Gross Domestic Product	Total value of goods and services produced per head by a country, in US dollars. Data for 2022 from World Bank (2024).
Democracy Index rating	From the Economist Intelligence Unit (2024), which divides states into full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes, and authoritarian regimes.
Freedom House rating	From Freedom House (2024), which divides states into groups rated Free, Partly Free, or Not Free.
Corruption score	From Transparency International (2024), which rates countries between zero (Highly Corrupt) and 100 (Very Clean).
Human Development Index rating	From the United Nations Development Programme (2022), which divides states into groups rated Very High, High, Medium, and Low.
Case study	A case study of each country, in 400 words or less, placing it within the context of the topic of the chapter.
Further reading	A list of three recent books that can be used to find further information on the Spotlight country.

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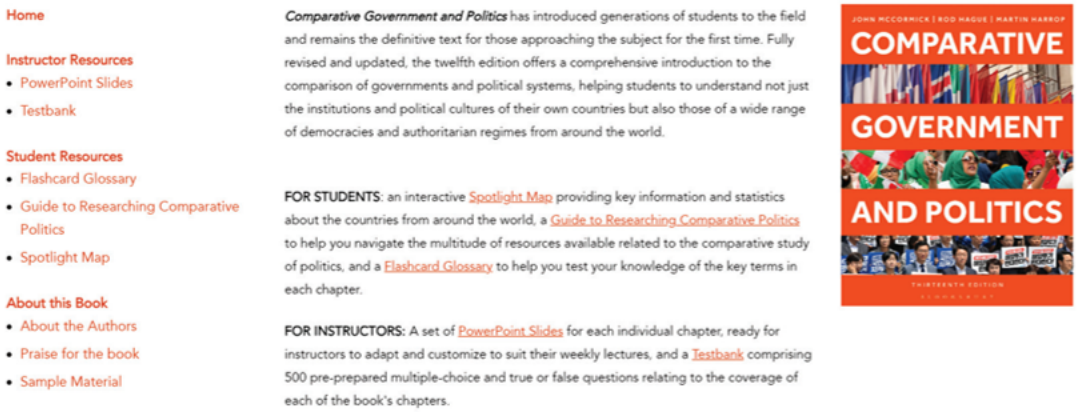
Online Resources

This book is accompanied by a freely available website which provides an array of resources for students and instructors. See: **bloomsbury.pub/comparative-government-and-politics-13e**


Home
Instructor Resources
• PowerPoint Slides
• Testbank
Student Resources
• Flashcard Glossary
• Guide to Researching Comparative Politics
• Spotlight Map
About this Book
• About the Authors
• Praise for the book
• Sample Material
Comparative Government and Politics has introduced generations of students to the field and remains the definitive text for those approaching the subject for the first time. Fully revised and updated, the twelfth edition offers a comprehensive introduction to the comparison of governments and political systems, helping students to understand not just the institutions and political cultures of their own countries but also those of a wide range of democracies and authoritarian regimes from around the world.
FOR STUDENTS: an interactive Spotlight Map providing key information and statistics about the countries from around the world, a Guide to Researching Comparative Politics to help you navigate the multitude of resources available related to the comparative study of politics, and a Flashcard Glossary to help you test your knowledge of the key terms in each chapter.
FOR INSTRUCTORS: A set of PowerPoint Slides for each individual chapter, ready for instructors to adapt and customize to suit their weekly lectures, and a Testbank comprising 500 pre-prepared multiple-choice and true or false questions relating to the coverage of each of the book's chapters.
JOHN MCCORMICK | ROD HAGUE | MARTIN HARROP
COMPARATIVE
GOVERNMENT
AND POLITICS
THIRTEENTH EDITION

FOR STUDENTS

- **Guide to Researching Comparative Politics** This guide helps students navigate their way through the multitude of resources available on the internet related to the comparative study of politics.
- **Flashcard Glossary** These flashcards help students to test their knowledge of the key terms highlighted and defined in each chapter.
- **Spotlight Map** An interactive map providing key information about the countries appearing in the Spotlight features in this book, as well as several additional countries.

FOR INSTRUCTORS

- **Testbank** The Testbank comprises a series of pre-prepared multiple-choice questions related to the coverage of each of the book's chapters.
- **PowerPoint Slides** A set of PowerPoint slides has been prepared for each chapter in the book, ready for instructors to adapt and customize to suit their weekly lectures.

PART I PRINCIPLES

CHAPTERS

1 Government and politics
2 Making comparisons
3 States and nations
4 Democratic rule
5 Authoritarian rule
6 Political culture

PREVIEW

The first part of the book provides a survey of the key concepts needed to understand government and politics. It begins with a chapter reviewing terms such as government, politics, and power, and discussing the ways in which we group political systems in order to better understand them comparatively. The second chapter looks at comparative research methods, including how we choose the cases we want to compare. This is followed by chapters discussing the characteristics of states and nations, and providing details on the features of democratic and authoritarian political systems. The opening group ends with a chapter taking a comparative view of political culture in its different forms.

hxdbzxy via Getty Images

1 Government and politics

CONTENTS

- Understanding government and politics
- Why do we compare?
- Government and governance
- Politics, power and authority
- Regimes and political systems

PREVIEW

Every field of study has its own vocabulary of terms or concepts that need to be understood in order to provide us with the building blocks of learning. Comparative government and politics are no different, which is why this opening chapter – after looking at the meaning of social and political science, and at the logic behind comparison and its many benefits – reviews five of the key terms that crop up regularly throughout the book: *government*, *governance*, *politics*, *power*, and *authority*. The chapter ends with a discussion of how to understand political systems and regimes, and of how we classify them, focusing on two of the typologies available to help us make better sense of a complex, diverse, and changing political world.

These concepts are central to an understanding of the manner in which governments are organized and the way in which politics unfolds. We will find, though, that their meanings are often contested. This is a problem found not just in political science, but throughout the social sciences. Anthropologists, economists, geographers, historians, and sociologists alike will often argue about the meaning of ideas and concepts, whose definitions are never static and which are fine-tuned as we learn more about the world around us, and blend views and perspectives from different parts of the world. Be prepared, then, for plenty of discussion – in this chapter and all those that follow – about the meaning of the key terms used to understand government and politics in its many different forms.

HIGHLIGHTS

- The main goal of political science is to help us understand how government works. Comparative politics adds depth to that understanding by drawing out the contrasts and similarities among different political systems.
- The benefits of comparison include establishing the core facts about government and politics, providing context, drawing up rules, helping us understand, and helping us make predictions and choices.
- While *government* describes the institutions and offices through which societies are governed, *governance* describes the process of collective decision-making.
- An exact definition of *politics* is difficult, because the term has many nuances, but it is clearly a collective activity, and involves making decisions.
- While *power* is the capacity to act and to bring about intended effects, *authority* is the acknowledged right to take such action.
- Typologies help us compare by imposing some order on the variety of the world's political systems.

UNDERSTANDING GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS

At an election in late 2023, Argentinian voters expressed their dismay at the political and economic conditions of their country by electing as president an economist with no political experience, named Javier Milei. With his brash style, his embrace of conspiracy theories, his conservative positions on guns and abortion, his attacks on the news media, and his unruly hair, Milei inevitably attracted comparisons with Donald Trump (Nicas, 2023). He was also the latest in a string of populist leaders who had come to power in countries as diverse as Brazil, Hungary, the Philippines, and the United States. Just how much his victory was based on support for his policies, and how much it was the result of desire for change among voters, remained to be seen. It would also take time to decide how many similarities there were among the winning candidates and the voter choices in these different countries. Were there common themes among them, or was each based on a unique set of circumstances?

It is cases such as this that remind us of the importance of understanding and comparing how government works, how it relates to politics, and how power is expressed and distributed. These are all topics that lie at the heart of the study of **political science**, which is interested in the functions of government, the activities of leaders and institutions, and in understanding why people act the way they do on political matters. While we can certainly consider the case of Argentina in isolation, and learn much from our research, it is more interesting – and potentially more revealing – to compare the Argentinian case with those in other countries, and also to ask why so many countries have chosen not to elect leaders such as Milei and Trump.

Political science: The study of the theory and practice of government and politics, focusing on the structure and dynamics of institutions, political processes, and political behaviour.

The noun *science* derives from the Latin *scientia* (knowledge), and describes the search for understanding. It had a broader meaning until the nineteenth century when it began to be applied more specifically to the physical and natural sciences (McLellan and Dorn, 2015), leaving the **social sciences** to head off on a separate track. Social scientists – including anthropologists, economists, geographers, historians, political scientists, and sociologists – study the institutions we build, the rules we agree, the processes we use, our underlying motives, and the outcomes of our interactions. Because human behaviour is often so unpredictable, though, and harder to tie down to unchanging rules, the social sciences are in many ways more difficult to study than the natural and physical sciences.

Social science: The study of human society and of the structured interactions among people within society.

One of the challenges – as we will see often in this book – is that the meanings of the terms used by social scientists are routinely contested. This is true in political science, for example, of terms such as *politics, nation*, *state*, and *rights*. The disagreements arise from the way in which the social sciences are often influenced by subjective preferences and biases, and by the evolution of our understanding of people, societies, and institutions. Despite these difficulties, though, the social sciences have helped us better understand human behaviour, and – argues Woodward (2014) – better understand change; they have illustrated the links between 'global events and everyday experience', and offered 'critical ways of thinking and of making sense of social, political, cultural and economic

life'. Without the work of social scientists, much of what we see happening in the world today would be hard to understand.

If social science is a division of the search for knowledge, then political science is the sub-division of social science that focuses on government and politics. The story does not end there, though, because political science itself has multiple different facets, beginning with the sub-fields listed in Figure 1.1. Among them, **comparative politics** is critical. Comparison is not only one of the oldest tools of political science (found, for example, in the work of the Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE)), but it is also one of the most basic of all human activities, lying at the heart of almost every choice we make in our lives. No surprise, then, that it should be central to research in the social sciences as a whole, and in political science in particular. Some have even argued that the scientific study of politics is unavoidably comparative (Almond, 1966, and Lasswell, 1968), and that 'comparison is the methodological core of the scientific study of politics' (Powell et al., 2014).

Comparative politics: The systematic study of government and politics in different communities, designed to better understand them by drawing out their contrasts and similarities.

As we will see in Chapter 2, the comparative study of government and politics has gone through many changes in the last few decades, the focus on a few older states having widened thanks to the dramatic rise in the number and variety of countries we can study. It has also been shaken by the effects of the end of colonialism, the beginning and the end of the Cold War, the new interest in authoritarianism, the changing balance of global power, and the worrying signs in recent years of new threats to democracy. All these changes have combined to demand that we take a more global approach to understanding the similarities and differences among government and politics in its different forms; see *Exploring Problems 1*.

Sub-field	*Subject matter*
Comparative politics	The study of government and politics in different settings, comparing institutions, processes, and policies.
International relations	The study of relations between and among states, including diplomacy, foreign policy, international organizations, war and peace.
National politics	The study of government and politics in a national setting, including the structure of government and the political activities of citizens.
Political philosophy	The study of the ways in which we think about government and politics, addressing topics such as authority, ethics, and freedom.
Political theory	The study of government and politics through the rational and value-neutral interpretation of structures and actions.
Public policy	The study of the approaches taken or avoided by governments in response to public needs.

Note: Political science is sub-divided differently in different countries and by different academic traditions. Additional sub-fields include law, methodology, political economy, and public administration.

Figure 1.1 The sub-fields of political science

EXPLORING PROBLEMS I

HOW CAN WE TAKE A GLOBAL APPROACH TO COMPARISON?

In each of the chapters in this book there is a feature titled *Exploring Problems,* designed to focus on some of the practical problems of government, and to pose questions about how we can address and understand them comparatively. We will look, for example, at the problems of declining trust in government, of unbalanced representation in legislatures, and of the threat posed by false news. Here, in the first of these features, we deal with the question of how to take a global approach to comparison. In other words, how do we work around the practical problem of the unequal amounts of information we have available on the nearly 200 different countries of the world?

Even a quick online search, or a glance along library shelves, or a scan through this book, will reveal that some countries are more deeply studied than others, and that language stands as a potent barrier to equality. In English, for example, there is a vast body of information and of scholarly study available on government and politics in Western Europe and the United States, in part because they are home to so many of the scholars of comparative politics, and in part because they are the two academic and publishing giants of the world. There is also a large body of information and scholarly study on countries that European- and American-based scholars find particularly interesting, including China, France, Germany, India, Japan, Mexico, Nigeria, and Russia.

By contrast, less has been written and published in English on smaller European states, on English-speaking countries with smaller populations (such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand), on most Latin American and sub-Saharan African states (except those, such as Nigeria, with a significant native or expatriate community of scholars), or on smaller Asian states. There has also been relatively little published about the authoritarian regimes of the world, in part because relatively little data is available on these countries, and in part because it can be hard to ask questions in these countries and to receive honest or accurate answers. In some, such as North Korea and Syria, it is almost impossible to undertake field research.

In short, the body of information and understanding about government and politics around the world is unequal, making it harder to draw universal conclusions. How should we address this problem?

- Should we reduce our reliance on the work of academic scholars, and make more use of reliable media outlets and the reports of international organizations for information about the less-deeply studied countries?
- To what degree can we rely on such sources for the analysis and context that we need to make consistent comparisons?
- Will such sources give us a similar base of information upon which to undertake our comparison, or will the results end up being skewed?

WHY DO WE COMPARE?

Elections are a constant part of the global political calendar. There is rarely a time when an election campaign is not under way, or voters are not going to the polls, or election results are not being tabulated, or the results of elections are not changing the structure of a government somewhere in the world. Consider just these two examples from 2023:

- In Finland, on 2 April, parliamentary elections were held. Finland is a democracy with a long history of coalition government; no one party ever wins enough seats to form a government by itself, and the previous elections (in 2019) had resulted in a five-party coalition with the leader of the Social Democrats – Sanna Marin – as the youngest person (and only the third woman) to hold the job of prime minister. Although her party increased the number of seats it held, her coalition partners did not do so well, and the result was the formation of a new and more conservative coalition with the centre-right Petteri Orpo as the new prime minister.
- In Zimbabwe, on 23–24 August, a general election was held for the president, the legislature, and local government. Zimbabwe had been ruled without a break since 1980 by the ZANU-PF party (an amalgam of two parties that fought for the country's independence: the Zimbabwe African National Union, and the Patriotic Front). Incumbent President Emmerson Mnangagwa was seeking – at age 80 – a second and final five-year term, while ZANU-PF was looking to retain its supermajority of 179 seats (out

LUIS TATO / Contributor

Supporters celebrate the victory of the governing ZANU-PF party in Zimbabwe, ensuring continued control by a party that has been in power since 1980, and whose policy failures have meant widespread economic and political hardship.

of 270) in the National Assembly. The elections were criticized by both the African Union and the European Union for being manipulated, with charges of intimidation and 'shortages' of voting ballots. As expected, ZANU-PF won both the presidency and a majority in the national Parliament.

We can understand a great deal about these two sets of elections by placing them within the historical and political context of the two individual countries. At the same time, the two cases are very different, not least because Finland is one of the most democratic and stable countries in the world, and Zimbabwe is one of the least democratic and unstable. We can better appreciate their distinctions by looking at the two cases in comparison with others, helping us better understand the qualities needed for successful democracies and the handicaps that encourage authoritarianism.

This is just one small example of the benefits of comparison, which helps pull us away from the narrow and the specific, giving us a wider perspective on the nature of government and politics. The benefits of comparison are many (see summary in Figure 1.2).

Describing government and politics

It is hard to understand government or politics – or to make comparisons among political systems – without first being familiar with the rules on which those systems are based. Above all, comparison helps us in our search for facts: how governments are structured, how institutions work and relate to one another, how political leaders come to office, how citizens relate to their governments, and how governments perform. As we will see in Chapter 2, 'comparative' politics was long understood to mean the study of 'foreign' political systems, and was almost purely descriptive in its approach. Description, though, only takes us so far, and comparison today is concerned also with understanding the *how* and the *why* of government and politics.

Purpose	*Qualities*
Description	Establishing the core facts about different political systems.
Explanation	Understanding the context within which a political system functions.
Rules	Drawing up the rules about government and politics.
Understanding	Helping us understand ourselves, those around us, and the global system.
Prediction	Helping us predict political behaviour and outcomes.
Making choices	Helping us make better political choices.

Figure 1.2 The benefits of comparison

Providing context

Although we know much about many national political systems from the studies that have been written about them, from the constitutions on which they are based, and from the news we see and hear about them, our understanding will always be limited unless we can place all this information in context. It is only by doing this that we can understand the origins of different political systems, the choices made in how the systems are structured, and the degree to which they are unusual or usual, efficient or inefficient, and opaque or transparent.

Take, for example, the six Spanish-speaking states of Central America: Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama. In many ways they are similar: they became independent at the same time (in 1821), they are ethnically similar, they are Catholic countries, they each have populations in the range of 5–17 million people, and they have all faced challenges with military government and authoritarianism. However, Costa Rica is one of the most vibrant democracies in the world, while neighbouring Nicaragua is one of the most authoritarian countries in the world. Panama has a per capita gross domestic product that is five times greater than that of Honduras, whose poverty and instability makes it – along with Guatemala and El Salvador – a source of unauthorized migration to the United States. What are the contextual explanations for the differences among a group of countries that should logically be very similar?

Drawing up rules

Comparison helps us draw up rules about government and politics, although the record on this front has been mixed. While the study of the physical and natural sciences has generated numerous laws that allow us to predict physical and natural phenomena, the social sciences – because they deal with human behaviour – have been less successful in generating laws or rules than in generating theories, tendencies, likelihoods, adages, or aphorisms. A famous example of the latter – see Chapter 5 – is Lord Acton's suggestion that 'Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely'.

Five examples of 'laws' of politics that have come out of comparative study are offered by Cuzán (2015):

1. All governments can count on the votes of only a minority of the electorate.
2. In developed democracies, incumbents are re-elected more than half the time thanks partly to their exploitation of state resources.
3. It is rare for incumbent parties to win much more than 60 per cent of the vote, and this never happens twice within the same spell in office.
4. Incumbents typically lose support from term to term.
5. In democracies, the alternation of parties and leaders in office is usual.

Iron law of oligarchy: States that the organization of political parties – even those formally committed to democracy – becomes dominated by a ruling elite.

The importance of strong comparison in rule-making is illustrated by the story of the **iron law of oligarchy** drawn up by the German scholar Robert Michels (1875–1936). Arguing that the organization of political parties inevitably comes

to be dominated by a ruling elite (Michels, 1911), his conclusions were based on studying only European social democratic parties. Once they were applied to a wider set of examples from around the world, the weaknesses of his 'law' became more obvious; the *iron* law, argues Diefenbach (2019), is actually not so iron at all.

Improving understanding

By pinning down the key features of political institutions, processes, and actions, we can better understand and appreciate the dynamics and character of political systems. The limitations of studying a single political system in isolation, though, are illustrated in a point made by Dogan and Pelassy (1990):

> Because the comprehension of a single case is linked to the understanding of many cases, because we perceive the particular better in the light of generalities, international comparison increases tenfold the possibility of explaining political phenomena. The observer who studies just one country could interpret as normal what in fact appears to the comparativist as abnormal.

Comparison not only helps free us from the limitations of studying a single system of government, but also helps us learn about places with which we are unfamiliar. The ability to interpret events outside our borders grows in importance as globalization continues to deepen and broaden the political, economic, and social links among us, as events from other parts of the world have a more direct impact on our lives, and as we find that we cannot afford to ignore the 'foreign'. Applying political theory further deepens our understanding by helping us better explain what we see (see *Using Theory 1*).

Making predictions

Comparison helps us make generalizations that can help us predict the outcome of political events. A careful analysis, for example, of campaigning and public opinion will help us better understand the possible outcome of elections. This is why we know from a study of those European countries where proportional representation is used (see Chapter 14) that it tends to result in more political parties winning seats and the creation of coalition governments. Similarly, if we know that subcontracting the provision of public services to private agencies (see Chapter 10) increases their cost-effectiveness in one country, then we can predict that the result will be similar in other countries.

While there is a lot to be said for strengthening predictions by drawing lessons from different cases, and asking 'what if' questions, there are many who argue that political science should not – or cannot – be in the business of predicting. The Austrian-British philosopher Karl Popper (1959) suggested that long-term predictions could only be developed in regard to systems that were 'well-isolated, stationary, and recurrent', and that human society was not one of them. More recently, an opinion piece in the *New York Times* raised hackles when its author (Stevens, 2012) argued that, in terms of offering accurate predictions, political science had 'failed spectacularly and wasted colossal amounts of time and money'. She went on to assert that no political scientist foresaw the break-up of the Soviet Union, the rise of Al Qaeda, or the Arab Spring. She quoted an award-winning study of political

USING THEORY 1

THEORY AND COMPARISON

Theory:
An abstract or generalized approach to explaining or understanding a phenomenon or a set of phenomena, supported by a significant body of hard evidence.

In each of the chapters in this book there is a feature titled *Using Theory*, designed to focus on a theoretical approach to comparison. Given their purpose, it makes sense to begin here with a survey of **theory**, which is a key part of the exercise of achieving understanding in any field of knowledge, opening our minds to different ways of seeing. The value of theory to comparison lies mainly in the way it can help pull together a cluster of otherwise unstructured observations and facts into a framework that we can use to guide ourselves as we seek to answer questions regarding everything from the formation of states to the character of institutions, the process of democratization, the methods of dictators, and the behaviour of voters.

However, several challenges face the political theorist. First, the field of comparative politics is so broad and so full of possibilities that it includes numerous theoretical approaches, ranging from the general to the specific. For some scholars, there are so many choices that the diversity can sometimes seem too much; the political scientist Sidney Verba (1991) once described that diversity as bordering on anarchic. Others see the variety as a strength, offering comparativists a multitude of approaches that can be shaped to meet different needs. For Przeworski (1995), the variety allows comparativists to be 'opportunists' who can use whatever approach works best.

Second, the value of political theory is often compromised by the way in which it falls victim of fad, fashion, and individual preference. For every theoretical approach that is proposed or applied, there often seems to be a long line of critics waiting to reject it and propose alternatives. It can sometimes seem as though the debate about the pros and cons of competing theoretical approaches is more vibrant than that about their real-world applications.

Third, the place of theory in the social sciences more generally is based on sometimes shaky foundations. The natural sciences have a strong record of developing theories that are well supported by the evidence, are broadly accepted, and can be used to develop laws, guide experiments, and make predictions. The social sciences suffer greater uncertainties (because they are trying to understand human behaviour), with the result that they generate theories that are subject to stronger doubts, with a weaker record in generating laws and predicting outcomes.

Finally, political theory has been criticized for focusing too much on ideas emerging from the Western tradition, a consequence of the relatively large numbers of political scientists working in Western states. As comparison takes a more global approach – pressed by the influence of globalization – there have been calls for it to be more inclusive. This trend will further expand the already substantial range of theoretical approaches, but it will remain hard to develop universal theories so long as many parts of the world remain relatively under-studied.

experts (Tetlock, 2005) which concluded that 'chimps randomly throwing darts at the possible outcomes would have done almost as well as the experts'.

As we will see in Chapter 2, though, the problem lies less with comparison as an approach than with some of its practicalities: the results of our research will depend on the number and the combination of the cases we use, the depth of information we have about each case, the reliability of our data, the research methods we use, and the extent to which we allow biases and assumptions to shape our research. Government and politics have been studied in a structured manner for barely a century, there is still much that we do not fully understand, and there are still many vigorous debates about meaning and interpretation. Comparison has opened up new horizons and exciting new possibilities as we learn more about the sheer variety of the forms in which government and politics exist.

Making better choices

Just as people can learn from each other, so can states; because their citizens have often similar hopes, aspirations, challenges, concerns, and ways of relating to those around them, states and political communities can use each other as research laboratories. They can learn from successes and mistakes, and adapting policies to different sets of domestic needs and circumstances. See the discussion in Chapter 15 about the ways in which policies are often transferred across borders as governments learn from one another, leading for a tendency for policies to become more alike in different situations.

Consider the example of approaches to education. Data collected by the United Nations show that spending on education is similar in all the major regions of the world, ranging between 3 and 6 per cent of GDP. Logically, then, the results of that spending should be about the same. However, while literacy rates are improving worldwide, Figure 1.3 shows significant regional differences,

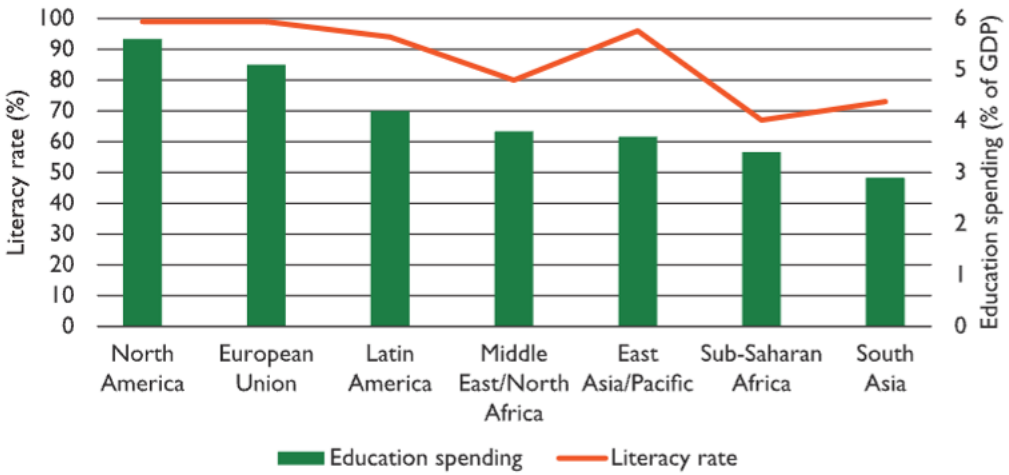


Figure 1.3 Comparing education spending and literacy rates

Source: Based on World Bank (2024). Data are for 2021.

from a high of 99 per cent in the European Union and North America to a low of 67 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa. Why do literacy rates vary so much in East Asia and the Middle East (96 and 80 per cent, respectively) when both regions spend about 3.8 per cent of their GDP on education? How does Latin America manage to spend relatively little (4.2 per cent of GDP) compared to North America (5.6 per cent) when the literacy rates for the two regions are not too different: 94 and 99 per cent respectively? What can regions with lower literacy rates learn from those with higher rates about the best way to invest their education funds?

The benefits of comparison, then, are many, and it is not surprising that comparison – as we saw earlier – is considered to be the methodological core of the scientific study of government and politics.

GOVERNMENT AND GOVERNANCE

Among the many victims of the Covid-19 pandemic was the government of Britain. Under the prime ministership of Boris Johnson, which came to office just six months before the breaking of the pandemic in early 2020, the government responded with emergency powers and a vaccination programme, but it was discovered that Johnson had breached the rules by holding parties at his official London residence. This was followed by charges of sexual misconduct against a senior member of the Johnson administration, building on a deepening dissatisfaction with the government that led to Johnson's resignation in September 2022. His Conservative party elected a new leader – Liz Truss – who became prime minister. Responding to Britain's economic problems, including rising inflation, she launched an unpopular programme of tax cuts and increased borrowing, leading to economic turmoil and her resignation as prime minister after just 49 turbulent days in office. She was succeeded as party leader and prime minister by Rishi Sunak, the former Chancellor (treasury minister), giving the UK – normally a paragon of political stability – its third leader in just two months.

What was happening here? What were the explanations behind the chaos? Could this happen in other parliamentary systems, or was it a result of circumstances unique to the UK? And what did these events say about the nature of government in a country with a long record of democracy? This case, along with many of the others in this book, underlines the importance of understanding the idea of ***government***. Small groups of people can reach collective decisions without any special procedures; a family, for example, can reach an understanding through informal conversations, and its agreements can be self-executing in the sense that those who make a decision carry it out themselves. However, such simple mechanisms are impractical for larger units such as towns, cities, or states, which must develop procedures and **institutions** for making and enforcing collective decisions.

Government: The institutions and processes through which societies are governed.

Institution: A formal or informal organization or practice with rules and procedures, marked by durability and internal complexity.

In political science, the term *institution* is usually applied to the major bodies of national government, particularly those described in constitutions, such as executives, legislatures, judiciaries, and, sometimes, political parties (see Table 1.1). Since they often have a legal identity, with privileges and duties under law, institutions are treated as formal 'actors' in the political process. However, the concept of an institution is also used more informally to include the rules, interactions and practices that distinguish such entities as the family, marriage, religion, money, law, and even language.

Taking the broad view, government consists of all those institutions endowed with public authority, and charged with reaching and executing decisions for a community. By this definition, the police, the military, bureaucrats, and judges are all part of government, even if they do not come to office through the means usually associated with government, such as elections. The term *government* can also apply to the group of people who govern (as in the Japanese government), a specific administration (the Modi government in India), the form of the system of rule (centralized government), and the character of administration (good government).

The classic case for government was made by the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) in his famous treatise *Leviathan* (Hobbes, 1651). In it, he cynically argued that humans had an uncanny ability to turn their ambitions into conflict, and that without a ruler to keep them in check, the outlook was grim: 'during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war, as is of every man, against every man'. The result was a life that was 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'. In order to avoid this outcome, people agreed to set up a commonwealth 'that may reduce all their wills, by plurality of voices, unto one will', thereby transforming anarchy into order, securing peace and the opportunity for mutually beneficial cooperation.

Table 1.1: The institutions of government

Institution	Role and purpose	Examples
Executive	Governing, making policy, providing leadership and direction.	Presidents, prime ministers, ministers, cabinets.
Legislature	Representing the interests of citizens; making law; forming governments.	Parliaments, Congresses, National Assemblies, Diets.
Judiciary and courts	Upholding and interpreting the constitution.	Supreme courts, constitutional courts.
Bureaucracy	Implementing policy.	Departments, ministries, divisions, agencies.
Political parties	Offering policy alternatives, fielding candidates, forming governments and oppositions.	Conservatives, liberals, socialists, greens, nationalists.

In a democratic regime (see Chapter 4), the job of government is to provide security and order to those who live under its jurisdiction. Citizens and businesses can plan for the long term, knowing that laws are developed in a standardized fashion, take into account competing opinions, and are consistently (if not always perfectly) applied. Of course, nothing is ever that simple, because governments create their own dangers. The risk of Hobbes's commonwealth is that it will abuse its authority, leading to the kind of authoritarianism outlined in Chapter 5. Also, and despite the claims of political leaders, not everyone is treated equally, even in the most stable and advanced democracies. A key aim in studying government, then, is to learn how to protect its benefits while also limiting its inherent dangers.

Governance: The process by which decisions, laws, and policies are made, with or without the input of formal institutions.

A related concept is **governance**. Where *government* suggests a relatively static world of institutions, *governance* highlights the process and quality of collective decision-making. The emphasis here is on the activity of governing, which is why, for example, we can talk about global governance: there is no such thing as a global government, but there is a large community of international organizations (such as the United Nations), thousands of treaties that form the basis of international law, and a constant interaction involving states, governments, corporations, and interest groups, all of which amount to a process of governance. Governance is less about the command-and-control function of government and more about the broader task of governing, a role which political leaders and bureaucrats in democracies share with other bodies. Governance is a supplement, rather than a replacement, for the concept of government.

The notion of governance has been prominent in discussions about the European Union (EU). This regional organization has several institutions – including an elected European Parliament and an appointed Court of Justice – that look much like an EU government but that are better regarded as a system of governance (McCormick, 2020). Their job is to develop laws and policies, and to oversee the implementation of those laws and policies, but they can only do as much as the foundational treaties of the EU, and the governments of its member states, allow them to do. They are better seen as servants of the process of European integration than as the government of the EU.

Because governance refers to the activity of ruling, it has also become the preferred term when studying the quality and effectiveness of rule. In this context, governance refers to what the institutions of government do and to how well or badly they do it. Good governance should at least be accountable, transparent, efficient, responsive, and inclusive, but these are all ideals; even those countries that rank at the top of political rating systems (see later in this chapter) have flaws. At the same time, bad governance is much more clearly evident in less democratic political systems; see *Spotlight 1* on Nigeria at the end of this chapter.

POLITICS, POWER, AND AUTHORITY

While government is tangible in the sense that we can see most of the people who are part of it, and the buildings that governing institutions inhabit, there are three other concepts that are equally important and yet less easy to identify and to measure.

Paula Bronstein / Stringer

Politics, power, and authority meet on the streets of Hong Kong as demonstrators use umbrellas to protect themselves from tear gas as they protest efforts by the Chinese government to exert more control over the province.

Politics

Politics: The process by which people negotiate and compete in making and executing shared or collective decisions.

At first glance, it might seem fairly easy to define **politics** and to list examples of political activity. When lawmakers in parliaments and congresses meet to argue the details of new laws and policies, for example, or to debate how to raise and spend the funds that make up national budgets, politics is clearly involved. When thousands of the citizens of Belarus took to the streets in 2020 to protest the result of the presidential election (and also to express their opposition to the government), they were engaging in politics. When Australian voters took part in a referendum in 2023 on changing the federal constitution to formally recognize the country's indigenous people, politics was again on view.

While the political heartland represented by such examples is clear, though, the boundaries of politics are less precise. When fighting breaks out between Armenians and Azerbaijanis over the status of Armenians living in Azerbaijan, are the two sides engaged in politics or in war? When the Chinese Communist Party changed the law in Hong Kong in 2020 in order to make it more difficult for the political opposition to challenge the authority of the party, was it playing or preventing politics? Is politics limited to governments, or can it also be found in businesses, families, and even university classrooms?

A precise definition of politics – one which fits just those qualities we instinctively call 'political' – is difficult, because the term is used in so many different ways. Three of its features, though, are clear:

- It is a collective activity, occurring between and among people. A lone castaway on a desert island could not engage in politics, but if there were two castaways on the same island, they would have a political relationship.

- It involves making decisions regarding a course of action to take or avoid, or a disagreement to be resolved.
- Once reached, political decisions become policy for the group, binding and committing its members even if some of them continue to resist (an action which is – in itself – political).

Politics is unavoidable because of the social nature of humans. We live in groups that must reach collective decisions about using resources, governing society, relating to others, and planning for the future. A country deliberating on whether to institute a lockdown in the wake of pandemic, a company deciding where to locate a new factory, a family discussing where to go on holiday, a university deciding whether its priority lies with teaching or research: these are all examples of groups forming judgements affecting their members. Politics involves assessing different options and opinions, and ideally brings members of a community together into a compromise course of action.

This interpretation of politics as a community-serving activity can be traced to the ancient Greeks. The philosopher Aristotle argued that 'man is by nature a political animal' (1962), by which he meant not only that politics was unavoidable, but also that it was the highest human activity, clearly separating us from other species. His view was that people can only express their nature as reasoning, virtuous beings by participating in a political community which works to identify the common interest through discussion, and tries to pursue it through actions to which all contribute. In Aristotle's model constitution, 'the ideal citizens rule in the interests of all, not because they are forced to by checks and balances, but because they see it as right to do so' (Nicholson, 2004).

This idea of politics as a peaceful process of open discussion leading to collective decisions acceptable to all stakeholders in a society is all well and good, but the reality rarely measures up to the ideal. More realistically, politics can also be seen as a competitive struggle for power and resources between people and groups seeking their own advantage, and perhaps aiming to impose their values on everyone else. From this second perspective, politics can involve narrow concerns taking precedence over collective benefits. Along the way, those in authority use methods that can spill over into manipulation, corruption, and perhaps even violence and bloodshed.

In this second view, politics is a competition for acquiring and keeping power, a process that yields winners and losers. This is reflected in the famous definition by the American political scientist Harold Lasswell of politics as 'who gets what, when, how' (Lasswell, 1936). In short, it is anything but the disinterested pursuit of the public interest. Taking the cynical extreme, the Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831) once said that 'war is the continuation of politics by other means', a view backed up by Chinese leader Mao Zedong (1893–1976) when he said that 'war is politics with bloodshed'. We could as easily turn these ideas around, though, and argue that politics is the continuation of war by other means, or that politics is war without bloodshed.

Power

At the heart of politics is the distribution and manipulation of **power**. The word comes from the Latin *potere*, meaning 'to be able', which is why the British philosopher Bertrand Russell (1938) saw power as 'the production of intended effects'. The greater our capacity to determine our own fate, the more power we possess. In this sense, describing China as a powerful country means that it is well placed to define and achieve its goals, and to stop others from being a block or a hindrance. Its economic power has been growing steadily now for decades, and its military power is beginning to deepen. Conversely, to lack power – as do many poor or unstable countries – is to be a follower rather than a leader. Arguably, though, every state has power, even if it is the kind of negative power involved in obliging a reaction from bigger and wealthier states; Syria and Honduras may seem relatively powerless, for example, but they are both the source of large numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers, sparking policy responses from the governments of the countries targeted by these groups.

Power: The capacity to bring about intended effects. The term is often used as a synonym for influence, but is also used more narrowly to refer to more forceful modes of influence: notably, getting one's way by threats.

Notice that the emphasis here is on power *to* rather than power *over* – on the ability to achieve goals, rather than the more specific exercise of control over other people or countries. However, most analyses of power focus on relationships: on power over others. Here, the three dimensions of power identified by the British sociologist Steven Lukes (2021) (see Table 1.2) help us answer the question of how we can measure power, or at least establish whether one actor is more powerful than another. As we move through these dimensions, the conception of power becomes more subtle – but also somewhat stretched beyond its normal use.

The first dimension is straightforward: power should be judged by identifying whose views prevail when the actors involved possess conflicting views on what should be done. The greater the correspondence between an actor's views and the decisions reached, the greater is that actor's influence: more wins indicate more power. The dimension is relatively clear and concrete, based on identifying preferences and observing decisions, and connecting directly with

Table 1.2: Three dimensions of power

Dimension	Core question	Application
First	Who prevails when preferences conflict?	Decision-making. Decisions are made on issues over which there is an observable conflict of interests.
Second	Who controls whether preferences are expressed?	Non-decision-making. Decisions are prevented from being taken on issues over which there is an observable conflict of interests.
Third	Who shapes preferences?	Ideological. Potential issues are kept out of politics altogether, whether through social forces, institutional practices, or the decisions of individuals.

Source: Based on Lukes (2021).

the concept of politics as the resolution of conflict within groups. In the United States, for example, and in spite of repeated mass shootings, the successes of the gun lobby have meant that most leaders of the two major political parties have refused to impose meaningful limits on gun ownership, meaning that a combination of lobbying and money has meant that guns remain widely available.

The second dimension of power focuses on the capacity to keep issues off the political agenda by preventing the discussion of topics which would run counter to the values or interests of decision-makers. As Bachrach and Baratz (1962) once put it, 'to the extent that a person or group – consciously or unconsciously – creates or reinforces barriers to the public airing of policy conflicts, that person or group has power'. In order to understand power, then, we need to understand the actors that gain the most from political decisions or the status quo, and those whose views are not heard. In Afghanistan under the control of the Taliban, for example, fear of government reprisals discourages many people from expressing their support for women's rights and democracy. By narrowing the public agenda in this way, the Taliban renders democracy a non-issue.

The third dimension broadens our conception of power by extending it to cover the formation, rather than merely the expression, of preferences. Where the first and second dimensions assume conflicting preferences, the third dimension addresses the idea of a manipulated consensus. In this and similar cases, agenda control is achieved by manipulating the flow of information so as to prevent disputes from arising in the first place. This became clear in 2022 after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Illustrating the famous adage (exact origins unknown) that the first casualty of war is the truth, it soon became clear that both Russia and Ukraine were using social media to present their versions of unfolding events, including the causes, consequences, and long-term significance of the war. Russia framed the war as a necessary defensive response to NATO expansion in Eastern Europe, and as necessary to 'de-nazify' Ukraine, while Ukraine framed the war as one of aggression, portraying its citizens and armed forces as heroic defenders against an unjustified invasion (Perez and Nair, 2022).

The implication of these examples of different forms of power is that the most efficient is one that allows for the shaping of people's information and preferences, thus preventing the first and second dimensions from coming into play. Denying people access to information is one way of achieving this, as in the examples of the selective briefings offered by many governments about the seriousness of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, and the differing narratives of the war in Ukraine. Power, then, is not just about whose preferences win out; we must also consider whose opinions are kept out of the debate and also the wider context in which those preferences are formed.

Authority: The right to rule. Authority creates its own power, so long as people accept that the person in authority has the right to make decisions.

Authority

In some ways, **authority** is more important to understanding government than either politics or power. Where power is the ability to act (or to rule), authority is the acknowledged right to do so. It exists when subordinates accept the capacity of superiors to give legitimate orders, which is the normal way of conducting political business in democracies. Democratic government

takes place through constitutions and laws, which both define the people and the institutions that have authority, and also place limits on that authority by protecting the rights of the governed. The German sociologist Max Weber (1922) suggested that, in a relationship of authority, the ruled implement the command as if they had adopted it spontaneously, for its own sake. For this reason, authority is a more efficient form of control than brute power. Yet, authority is more than voluntary compliance. For citizens to accept the authority of their government does not mean that they always agree with the laws it has adopted or the policies it pursues; it means only that they accept the right of the government to make laws and their obligations to obey. In this way, authority provides the foundation for the state.

The understanding of authority in undemocratic regimes is quite different. While they have constitutions and laws, like democracies, and their governing institutions are mainly legitimate, authoritarian leaders exert powers that ignore, subvert, avoid, or go beyond the law. In other words, their actions go beyond the limits of their authority. This happens, for example, every time the military in a country stages a coup that removes the recognized leader of a country from office (even if that leader came to office through illegitimate means). One example was the July 2023 coup in Niger that removed President Mohammed Bazoum just over two years after he won the country's first democratic election since its independence in 1960. The military government that replaced him was clearly illegitimate, and did not have the authority to take or to exert power, and yet it had the means to ignore all demands that it step down.

REGIMES AND POLITICAL SYSTEMS

In all systems of government, whether democratic or authoritarian, the forces and influences involved come together to form both a **regime** and a **political system**. Although these terms are often used as synonyms, the term *regime* describes a political type (for example, a democracy, a dictatorship, an elitist system, or a neoliberal regime), while the term *political system* summarizes the interacting parts that make up a regime. In the worlds of the Canadian-American political scientist David Easton (1965), 'a political system can be designated as the interactions through which values are authoritatively allocated for a society; that is what distinguishes a political system from other systems lying in its environment'.

Regime: A political type, based on a set of principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures.

Political system: The interactions and institutions that make up a regime.

The term *regime* has, unfortunately, come to be used most commonly in a pejorative sense to describe authoritarian or illegitimate political systems. So, for example, while the institutions that make up the Russian government might be described as its political system, we will often hear critical references to the Putin regime, or the Russian regime. In a related fashion, the term *regime change* is typically used to describe the overthrow or removal of a government or a political system considered to be illegitimate or undesirable. For example, it has been used to describe efforts by exiles to work for the end of the Maduro regime in Venezuela, and by some Western leaders to suggest that they are not looking for a change of regime in Russia.

In actuality, the term *regime* has a more neutral and clinical meaning than the manner in which it is often used would suggest. Hence, we can talk about Sweden as being a democratic regime, with a political system that is the space within which most of the activity of Swedish politics – whether positive or negative, or whether in the public or private interest – takes place. The Swedish regime has many similarities with the regimes of Denmark, Finland, and Norway, but its political system is different from those of India, Mexico, or South Africa, even if all these countries have governing institutions that have approximately the same purpose.

Although the political systems of states have many core elements in common – an executive, a legislature, and a judiciary, for example – the manner in which these elements work and relate to one another is far from the same. The various parts of different political systems have different sets of powers and responsibilities, they relate to each other differently, and they are influenced by different sets of norms and expectations. To complicate matters, political systems are moving targets: they evolve and change, and often at a rapid pace. Finally, there are a lot of them: nearly 200 national political systems, and hundreds of thousands of local systems of government.

Political typologies

Typology: The system by which the types of something (states, languages, personalities, buildings, and organizations, for example) are classified according to their common features.

In order to make sense of this complex picture, it is helpful to have a guide through the maze, or to classify states according to a **typology**. With such a system in hand, we can make broad assumptions about the states in each group, using case studies to provide more detailed focus, and thus more easily develop explanations and rules, and test theories of political phenomena (Yin, 2018). The ideal typology is one that is simple, neat, consistent, logical, and as real and useful to the casual observer as it is to students, journalists, political leaders, or political scientists. Unfortunately, such an ideal has proved hard to achieve; political scientists disagree about the value of typologies, and even those who use them cannot agree on the criteria that should be taken into account, or the groups into which states should be divided, or the labels to use, or even which states to place in each group. The result is that, while there are multiple typologies from which to choose, none of them is generally accepted by political science.

The first attempt at developing such a system – and one of the earliest examples of comparative politics at work – was Aristotle's classification of the 158 city-states of Ancient Greece. Between approximately 500 and 338 BCE, these communities were small settlements with often different forms of rule, providing him with a laboratory in which to ask which type of political system achieved the ideals that he sought in a government: stability and effectiveness. Using two dimensions – the number of people involved in governing, and the form of government (based on whether rulers governed in the common interest or in their own interest) – he generated six classes of government, ranging from democracy to tyranny.

Another attempt to build a typology was *The Spirit of the Laws*, a treatise on political theory written by the French philosopher Charles de Secondat, Baron

de Montesquieu (1689–1755), and first published in 1748. He identified three regime types:

- *Republican* systems in which the people or some of the people had supreme power.
- *Monarchical* systems in which one person ruled on the basis of fixed and established laws.
- *Despotic* systems in which a single person ruled on the basis of their own priorities and perspectives.

A more recent typology that was current throughout much of the Cold War (late 1940s to late 1980s) was the Three Worlds system. Less a formal classificatory template developed by political scientists than a Western response to the geopolitical realities of the Cold War, it divided the world into three groups of countries based on ideological goals and political alliances:

- A *First World* of wealthy, democratic industrialized states, most of which were partners in the Western alliance against communism.
- A *Second World* of communist systems, including most of those states ranged against the Western alliance.
- A *Third World* of poorer, less democratic, and less developed states, some of which took sides in the Cold War, but some of which did not.

The system was simple and evocative, providing neat labels that could be slipped with ease into media headlines and everyday conversation. Even today, the term *Third World* still conjures up powerful images of poverty, underdevelopment, corruption, and political instability. Unfortunately, the typology was always more descriptive than analytical, and it was also both pejorative (in its ranking) and simplistic: to consider almost all the states of Africa, Asia, and Latin America as a single Third World was always asking too much, given their political and economic differences.

There has been no lack of efforts to develop new and more relevant typologies in recent decades, and while none has been universally accepted, this book tries to address this problem by relying on a combination of two typologies:

- The Democracy Index maintained by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), a UK-based organization related to the news weekly *The Economist*.
- The *Freedom in the World* index maintained by the US-based research institute Freedom House.

Both typologies use multiple criteria to rank countries, and while the results are not exactly the same, there is a high degree of overlap (see Table 1.3), and both have also identified the same worrying reversals we have seen in recent years in the health of democracy. Neither typology is perfect, questions can be asked about the methodologies upon which they are based, drawing the line between different political regimes has long been contentious (Lührmann et al., 2018), and we should always beware the danger of taking classifications and rankings too literally; government and politics are too complex to be reduced to a single table. Nonetheless, these typologies give us useful insights and points

Table 1.3: Comparing political rankings

	Democracy Index		*Freedom in the World*	
	Score out of 10	Regime type	Score out of 100	Freedom rating
Norway	9.81	Full democracy	98	Free
New Zealand	9.61	Full democracy	99	Free
Sweden*	9.39	Full democracy	99	Free
Germany*	8.80	Full democracy	93	Free
Canada	8.69	Full democracy	97	Free
Australia*	8.66	Full democracy	95	Free
Japan*	8.40	Full democracy	96	Free
UK*	8.28	Full democracy	91	Free
France	8.07	Full democracy	89	Free
USA*	7.85	Flawed democracy	83	Free
India*	7.18	Flawed democracy	66	Partly Free
South Africa*	7.05	Flawed democracy	79	Partly Free
Brazil*	6.68	Flawed democracy	72	Partly Free
Thailand	6.35	Flawed democracy	36	Not Free
Bangladesh	5.87	Hybrid	40	Not Free
Mexico*	5.14	Hybrid	60	Partly Free
Kenya	5.05	Hybrid	52	Partly Free
Turkey*	4.33	Hybrid	33	Not Free
Nigeria*	4.23	Hybrid	44	Partly Free
Egypt*	2.93	Authoritarian	18	Not Free
Iraq*	2.88	Authoritarian	30	Not Free
Venezuela*	2.31	Authoritarian	15	Not Free
Russia*	2.22	Authoritarian	13	Not Free
China*	2.12	Authoritarian	9	Not Free
Saudi Arabia	2.08	Authoritarian	8	Not Free
Iran*	1.96	Authoritarian	11	Not Free
North Korea	1.08	Authoritarian	3	Not Free

Source: Based on Economist Intelligence Unit (2023) and Freedom House (2024).

For the latest information, see Economist Intelligence Unit at https://www.eiu.com and Freedom House at https://freedomhouse.org.

** Spotlight cases in this book. European Union is not rated.*

of reference, and a guide through an otherwise confusing world. More detail on how they are calculated is offered in Chapters 5 and 6.

Economies and societies

We will go further in this text and also use economic and social data to help us find our way through our comparisons. The relationship between politics and economics in particular is so intimate that – as we will see in Chapter 18 – there is an entire field of study devoted to the subject, called political economy. This involves looking not just at the structure and wealth of economies, but also at the relationship between politics and economic performance: good

governance is more likely to go hand-in-hand with a successful economy, and bad governance less so.

The core measure of economic activity is output, and while there are various ways of measuring this, the most popular is **gross domestic product** (GDP). This is the sum of the value of the domestic and foreign economic output of the residents of a country in a given year, and is converted to US dollars to allow for comparison. Although the accuracy of the data itself varies by country, and the conversion to dollars raises questions about the effect of exchange rates, such measures are routinely used by governments, corporations, and international organizations in measuring economic size. While GDP provides a measure of the absolute size of national economies, however, it does not take into account the population size of different states. For a more revealing comparison we need to divide GDP by population, giving us a per capita GDP figure that gives us a better idea of the relative economic size of different states. See Table 1.4 for examples.

Gross domestic product: The value of the total domestic and foreign output by residents of a country in a given year.

Finally, we must not forget the importance of understanding different political systems by looking at their relative performances in terms of helping

Table 1.4: Comparing economies

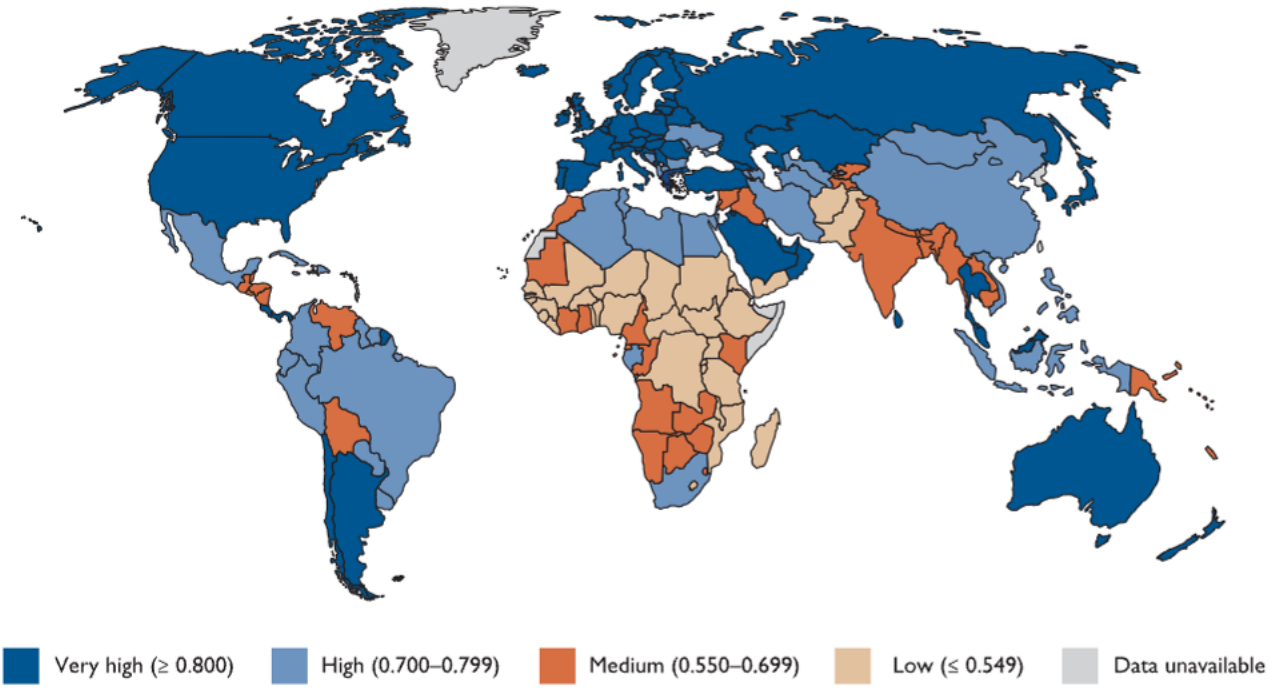
	GDP (billion US$)	Per capita GDP (US $)
United States	25,440	76,330
China	17,960	12,720
European Union	16,746	37,432
Japan	4,232	33,823
Germany	4,082	48,718
India	3,417	2,410
UK	3,090	46,125
France	2,780	40,886
Russia	2,240	15,270
Canada	2,138	54,917
Brazil	1,920	8,917
Australia	1,692	65,100
Mexico	1,465	11,496
Turkey	907	10,674
Sweden	591	56,378
Venezuela	482	15,975
Egypt	476	4,295
Nigeria	472	2,163
Iran	413	4,670
South Africa	405	6,766
New Zealand	248	48,418
Luxembourg	81	125,006
Burundi	3	259
WORLD	101,326	12,744

Source: Based on World Bank (2024). Data are for 2022. These numbers represent just a snapshot in time. For the latest information, see World Bank at https://data.worldbank.org.

provide their citizens with basic social needs. There are different ways of understanding 'basic needs', but at a minimum they would include adequate nutrition, education, and health care, and in this regard the most often-used comparative measure is the Human Development Index maintained by the UN Development Programme. Using a combination of life expectancy, adult literacy, educational enrolment, and per capita GDP, it rates human development for most of the states in the world as either Very High, High, Medium, or Low (see Map 1.1). On the 2022 index, most of the wealthier democracies were in the top 30 – with the top three places being held by Switzerland, Norway, and Iceland – while the poorest states (most of which were also authoritarian) ranked at the lower end of the table; the last three places were held by Niger, Chad, and South Sudan.

Although the conclusion we can draw from looking at numbers such as these is that wealthier democracies have been more successful in meeting the needs of their people than poorer authoritarian systems, the picture is not that simple. True enough, the citizens of democracies are, overall, wealthier and healthier and happier than those who live in authoritarian regimes, but we should not overlook the sometimes enormous divisions that exist within states. All are divided along multiple planes, including gender, wealth, ethnicity, and religion, and we will see plenty of examples in the chapters that follow of political systems that have failed to be inclusive or to have achieved a state of equal opportunity for their citizens.

Map 1.1 The Human Development Index



Source: United Nations Development Programme (2022). For the most recent information, see UNDP at http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-index-hdi.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Is it fair to describe comparison as 'the methodological core of the scientific study of politics'?
- Can we truly understand government and politics without comparison?
- Which is the most important of the benefits of comparative government and politics?
- Where does politics begin and end?
- Who has power, who does not, and how do we know?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Democracy Index and *Freedom in the World* as means of classifying political systems?

KEY CONCEPTS

- Authority
- Comparative politics
- Governance
- Government
- Gross domestic product
- Institution
- Iron law of oligarchy
- Political science
- Political system
- Politics
- Power
- Regime
- Social science
- Theory
- Typology

FURTHER READING

Boix, Carles, and Susan C. Stokes (eds) (2007) *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics* (Oxford University Press). Although more than 1,000 pages in length, this is a rich survey of the many different dimensions of comparative politics.

Collander, David C., and Elgin F. Hunt (2022) *Social Science: An Introduction to the Study of Society*, 18th edn (Routledge). An introduction to social science, and to its methods and goals, with examples from all over the world.

Dogan, Mattei, and Dominique Pelassy (1990) *How to Compare Nations: Strategies in Comparative Politics*, 2nd edn (Chatham House). Although published many years ago, the arguments made in this short and readable book are still relevant.

Garner, Robert, Peter Ferdinand, and Stephanie Lawson (2023) *Introduction to Politics*, 5th edn (Oxford University Press). A general survey of politics, with sections on key concepts, comparative politics, and global politics.

Heywood, Andrew (2019) *Politics*, 5th edn (Bloomsbury). Another survey of politics, with chapters on ideas, institutions, and processes.

Kendall-Taylor, Andrea, Natasha Lindstaedt, and Erica Frantz (2019) *Democracies and Authoritarian Regimes* (Oxford University Press). A survey of the features of democracies, dictatorships and autocracies, and the challenges faced by democracy.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Visit **bloomsbury.pub/comparative-government-and-politics-13e** to access additional materials to support teaching and learning.

SPOTLIGHT 1
NIGERIA

PROFILE

Although Nigeria has been independent since 1960, it was not until 2015 that it experienced a presidential election in which the incumbent was defeated by an opposition opponent. This makes an important point about the challenges faced by Africa's largest country by population, and one of the continent's major regional powers, in developing a stable political form. Nigeria is currently enjoying its longest spell of civilian government since independence, but the military continues to play an important role, the economy is dominated by oil, corruption is rife at every level of society, security concerns and poor infrastructure discourage foreign investment, and a combination of ethnic and religious divisions pose worrying threats to stability. Incursions and attacks since 2002 by the Islamist group Boko Haram have added to the country's problems, but it has still, nonetheless, been recently upgraded from authoritarian to a hybrid on the Democracy Index.

Form of government	Federal presidential republic consisting of 36 states and a Federal Capital Territory. Independence achieved 1960, and most recent constitution adopted 1999.
Executive	Presidential. A president elected for a maximum of two four-year terms, supported by a vice-president and cabinet of ministers, with one from each of Nigeria's states.
Legislature	Bicameral National Assembly: lower House of Representatives (360 members) and upper Senate (109 members), both elected for fixed and renewable four-year terms.
Judiciary	Federal Supreme Court, with 14 members nominated by the president, and either confirmed by the Senate or approved by a judicial commission.
Electoral system	President elected in national contest, and must win a majority of all votes cast and at least 25 per cent of the vote in at least two-thirds of Nigeria's states. Possibility of two runoffs. National Assembly elected using single-member plurality.
Parties	Multi-party, led by the centre-left All Progressives Congress and the centre-right People's Democratic Party.
Population	218 million
Gross Domestic Product	$472 billion
Per capita GDP	$2,163
Democracy Index rating	Hybrid
Freedom House rating	Partly Free
Corruption score	25/100
Human Development Index rating	Low

CASE STUDY: GOVERNMENT AND GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA

SUNDAY AGHAEZE / Stringer

President Muhammadu Buhari addresses members of the Nigerian National Assembly in Abuja after submitting his annual federal budget.

Many of the facets of the debate about government, governance, politics, power, and authority are on show in Nigeria, a country that is still struggling to develop a workable political form and national identity in the face of multiple internal divisions.

Understanding Nigeria is complicated by the lack of durable patterns of government. Since independence in 1960, Nigerians have lived through three periods of civilian government, five successful and several attempted military coups, a civil war, and nearly 30 years of military rule. The first civilian government (1960–66) was based on the parliamentary model, but the second and third (1979–83, and 1999–present) were based on the presidential form. Since 2007, Nigeria has three times made the transition from one civilian government to another, and the long-term political prognosis has improved. Still, many uncertainties remain.

Political doubts reflect economic drift, and vice versa. The country's population is large and growing, straining an infrastructure that is already woefully inadequate to support a modern economy. Nigeria's core economic problem is its heavy reliance on oil, which leaves the size and health of the economy – as well as government revenues – dependent on the fluctuating price of oil. To make matters worse, much of the oil wealth has been squandered and stolen, feeding into the corruption that is rife in Nigeria, and there have been bitter political arguments over how best to spend the balance; see discussion about the resource curse in Chapter 18.

Nigeria's political problems are more than just economically driven. In social terms, Nigeria is divided by ethnicity, handicapping efforts to build a sense of national identity. It is also divided by religion, with a mainly Muslim north, a non-Muslim south, and controversial pressures from the north to expand the reach of sharia, or Islamic law. Regional disparities are fundamental, with a north that is dry and poor and a south that is better endowed in resources and basic services. Regional tensions have been made worse by the geography of oil, most of which lies either in the south-east or off the coast, but with much of the profit distributed to political elites in other parts of the country.

Further reading

Ajayi, Rotimi, and Joseph Yinka Fashagba (eds) (2021) *Nigerian Politics* (Springer).

Campbell, John, and Matthew T. Page (2018) *Nigeria: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press).

Levan, A. Carl, and Patrick Ukata (eds) (2018) *The Oxford Handbook of Nigerian Politics* (Oxford University Press).

2

Making comparisons

CONTENTS

- Understanding comparison
- Origins and evolution
- Choosing cases
- Choosing methods
- The challenges of comparison

PREVIEW

In Chapter 1, we looked at some of the key concepts of comparative government and politics. Now we need to look at how we go about making comparisons: the questions that need to be asked, the theories and methods that can be used to carry out research, the options for designing comparative research, and the pitfalls to be avoided. This chapter is partly a survey of methods and partly a practical *How To* guide to comparison, giving more insight into the dynamics of that process. The goal is not to cover the details of specific techniques such as interviewing or statistical analysis so much as to provide an outline of strategies that will help you to work on comparative projects of your own.

The chapter begins with a review of the comparative method, and of changes in approaches to comparative government and politics. It then looks at how we decide on the number of cases to compare; these range from one to many, the research methods used being different for single-case studies, those involving a small number of cases (small-*n* studies), and those involving a large numbers of cases (large-*n* studies). The chapter then reviews the features of qualitative, quantitative, and historical research methods, arguing that the latter can be useful in offsetting some of the limitations inherent in the case study method. It ends with a discussion of some of the challenges faced by comparison, including the troubling problem of having too few cases and too many variables.

HIGHLIGHTS

- The comparative method plays a key role in all political research, helping encourage critical thinking whether we take an empirical or normative approach.
- Approaches to comparison have undergone substantial changes in a short period of time, a more global perspective having replaced an early Western insularity.
- Comparative researchers must make choices that include the unit of analysis, the level of analysis, and the variables to be studied.
- Research methods include the qualitative, quantitative, and historical methods, and a combination of all three.
- In making comparisons between two or more factors, it is worth considering the relative strengths of the most similar and most different system designs.
- Comparative research faces numerous challenges ranging from the number of cases available to bias in the selection of those cases.

UNDERSTANDING COMPARISON

The smallest country in the world – both by population and by economic output – is Tuvalu, a cluster of nine small islands in the western Pacific. It has just over 11,000 residents living on about 26 square kilometres (10 square miles) of land, and an economy measured in the tens of millions of dollars. Once known as the Ellice Islands, it became independent from Britain in 1978, since when it has struggled to live off food imports and remittances sent home by Tuvaluans working on cargo ships. As a low-lying chain of islands, with a maximum elevation of just under 5 metres (15 feet), it also finds itself at the forefront of concerns about the effects of climate change. On the political front, its parliamentary democracy is strong enough to earn it a rating of Free by Freedom House.

Meanwhile, the biggest country in the world – by population but not by economic output – is India, whose dimensions stand in stark contrast to those of Tuvalu: it has 130,000 times as many people, 126,000 times as much land, an economy that is 56,000 times bigger and infinitely more diverse, the biggest elections in the world, an enormous military backed up by nuclear weapons, and an emergent space programme. In one area, though, it lags behind Tuvalu with a ranking of a flawed democracy in the Democracy Index and Partly Free by Freedom House.

Despite all these differences, one quality that Tuvalu and India have in common is that they are both sovereign states, and as such they are potentially of interest to scholars of comparative politics. While nothing has ever been published that compares these two cases, and the volume of publications on the government and politics of India hugely outweighs studies of Tuvalu, our understanding of government would never be complete without understanding these two cases, and the many other cases of government around the world. What are their differences and similarities? Is there much to be gained by comparing such dramatically different cases? Can a study of one shed much light on a study of the other? These cases – and questions of this kind – are an example of the application of the **comparative method** to political research.

Comparative method: The process by which different cases are compared in order to better understand their qualities, and to develop hypotheses, theories, and concepts.

Although the term implies that there is a single and generally agreed approach to comparison, in fact there are multiple methods, including the qualitative, the quantitative, and the historical (all covered later in this chapter). These alternatives – whether used in political science, history, linguistics, biology, or other fields of study – leave comparative research open to charges that it lacks a unified approach. At the same time, they can be seen as a strength of the comparative method because of the flexibility that they offer: different methods work better in different circumstances. Whichever approach is used, though, the goal of comparison in political science is to help encourage **critical thinking** about government and politics. The logic behind this is neatly summarized in the argument by Swanson (1971) that 'Thinking without comparison is unthinkable. And, in the absence of comparison, so is all scientific thought and scientific research'.

Critical thinking: The careful and objective analysis of facts and data with a view to making an informed judgement about a phenomenon.

Expressed differently, comparison involves researching and learning the key facts about political systems, thinking comparatively about their significance, questioning and challenging what we find, and then drawing conclusions from the facts. Without such thinking, all we would have would be a collection of facts and figures, and little context with which to interpret our observations. Take the example of elections again: with learning and study, we can establish that there are four main kinds of elections in the world (plurality systems, proportional representation, majority systems, and mixed systems – see Chapter 14). Without critical thinking, though, we are unlikely to understand the significance of these different systems, the reasons behind their evolution and use, the ways in which they shape the creation of governments, or the effects they might have on the way that different governments function.

Empirical approach: Conclusions or inferences based on facts, experience, or observation rather than logic or theory.

Normative approach: Reaching judgements and prescriptions about what should have happened or what ought to happen.

In approaching political research, we need to be aware of the debate over the differences between **empirical** and **normative** perspectives. The first is descriptive in that it uses facts to ask what happened and why, while the second is evaluative in that it uses judgements or prescriptions to ask what *should* have happened or what *ought* to happen (see Gerring and Yesnowitz, 2006). Take electoral systems, for example: the statement 'proportional representation encourages multi-party systems' is empirical, while the statement 'proportional representation could be used to encourage multi-party systems' is normative.

Most political research tries to be empirical in the sense that it asks why things are the way they are in a manner that tries to be value-neutral, as when a researcher looks into the causes of war in a purely objective and scientific fashion. Other research takes a more normative approach by asking what should be done in order to achieve a desired outcome. A researcher, for example, might question the phenomenon of authoritarian government in a more value-driven and philosophical manner, asking whether and under what circumstances it is ever justified.

Empirical and normative approaches are not mutually exclusive, and there has been renewed demand for the idea of making political science more relevant by combining the two. For Gerring and Yesnowitz (2006), 'Empirical study in the social sciences is meaningless if it has no normative import … Likewise, a normative argument without empirical support may be rhetorically persuasive or logically persuasive, but it will not have demonstrated anything about the world out there.' The importance of combining the two is reflected in the way that some of the towering figures in the history of political thought straddled the two perspectives, as illustrated by the cases of Machiavelli and Marx:

- Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) was a Florentine writer and historian whose masterpiece *The Prince* examined the qualities of power and the means used by rulers to win, keep, and manipulate it. On the one hand, his book can be seen as an empirical (and even cynical) analysis of the nature and exercise of power in the real world. On the other hand, it can also be understood as normatively endorsing the sometimes brutal tactics used by rulers to sustain their position.

Table 2.1: Theories used in comparative politics

Theory	Chapter of book	Theory	Chapter of book
Autocratization	5	Interpretivism	3
Behaviouralism	2, 14	Leadership theories	8
Class theory	18	Media theories	12
Corporatism	16	Modernization	2
Cultural theory	6	New institutionalism	7
Democratization	5	Pluralism	16
Dependency	18	Rational choice	13
Elite theory	9	Structuralism	17
Feminism	10	Systems theory	11
Institutionalism	7		

- Karl Marx (1818–83) was a German philosopher who wrote a vast body of empirical work presenting history as a class struggle between the owners of the means of production and workers, arguing that states were governed in the interests of the owners. He concluded that capitalism created internal tensions which ensured that it was sowing the seeds of its own inevitable destruction – see Chapter 18. Underlying this empirical analysis was a normative concern with accelerating the overthrow of capitalism so as to create the possibility of a new classless society. In Marx's work, empirical research was motivated by normative goals.

The choices available in research methods are closely tied to the choices available in theoretical approaches to comparison, of which there are many; see Table 2.1, which lists most of the major theories used by comparativists, with references to the chapters in this book where more detail can be found. Theory is a simplifying device or a conceptual filter that can help us sift through a body of facts, decide which are primary and which are secondary, enable us to organize and interpret the information, and develop complete arguments and explanations about the objects of our study. Why, for example, are some countries politically divided when others are not? What is the appeal of nationalism and populism? Why does democracy seem to be backsliding in some countries but not in others?

ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

Although comparison lies at the heart of all research, the sub-field of comparative politics is relatively young. As a systematic endeavour, it can be traced back to the origins of modern political science in the late nineteenth century, but it long lagged behind the study of domestic politics, and still lacks either a well-developed identity, or a single (or even dominant) theoretical approach.

We saw in Chapter 1 how Aristotle is credited with the first attempt to classify political systems, but his work was mainly descriptive and did not establish principles that had much lasting power. Later, some of the biggest names in political science and philosophy – including Machiavelli and Marx – were to make arguments that would contribute to comparative politics, but none of them took the kind of systematic comparative approach to understanding government and politics more often used today.

The late emergence of comparative politics as a sub-field of political science was partly a result of the small number of cases available until the twentieth century, and partly a result of most scholars being more interested in studying their home political systems than in taking a wider view. For European scholars, the differences among European states were not seen to be particularly profound or interesting, which is partly why the birth of modern comparative politics took place in the United States (see Munck, 2007). However, even though American scholars began to study 'foreign' political systems as distinct from their own, few of them thought that they had much to learn from other systems, thanks to a deeply held belief that the US system was superior (Wiarda, 1991). The few American scholars who studied other systems before World War II focused mainly on Western Europe, with the Soviet Union and Japan added later, and their comparisons were more often descriptive than analytical.

Attitudes changed after World War II, when the Cold War made American scholars and policymakers more interested in better understanding their immediate allies and enemies. Eventually, this interest extended to potential allies and enemies in Latin America, Asia, and Africa (Lim, 2010). The end of the colonial era also saw a near-doubling in the number of sovereign states, from just over 70 in 1945 to more than 130 in 1970 (see Chapter 3). As well as an emerging interest in newly independent states, there was also a change in the approach taken by comparative political scientists, whose past work had been often criticized for being too parochial, too descriptive, too lacking in theory, and not even particularly comparative (Macridis, 1955). As part of what became known as the behavioural revolution, comparativists became interested in studying the actions as well as the institutions of government, in explaining as well as describing, and in taking a more scientific approach to theory and methods.

Behaviouralism: An approach to the study of politics that emphasizes people over institutions, focusing on the systematic study of the behaviour of individuals.

The shift towards **behaviouralism** – which Dahl (1961) was later to describe as a 'protest movement' within political science – can mainly be traced back to the work of the political scientist Charles Merriam at the University of Chicago in the 1920s. He argued the importance of moving beyond the study of formal rules and looking at the actions of individuals, but it was not until the post-war era of decolonization that his ideas became more widely adopted; in newly independent states, government institutions often proved to be transitory as presidents, and then military governments, quickly dispensed with the constitutions written at independence. A fresher and wider approach – one rooted in social, economic, and political realities – was needed to understand politics in what came to be known as the developing world. (For more on behaviouralism, see *Using Theory 14*.)

Coincidentally, the post-war generation of political scientists in the United States wanted to apply innovative social science techniques developed during World War II, such as interview-based sample surveys of ordinary people. In this way, the study of politics could be presented as a social science and become eligible for research funds made possible by that designation. The study of legislatures, for example, moved away from formal aspects (such as the procedures by which bills became laws) towards legislative behaviour (such as how members did their job, and the influences on their thinking). Researchers delved into the social backgrounds of representatives, their voting records, their career progression, and their willingness to rebel against the party line. Similarly, scholars who studied judiciaries began to focus on judges rather than courts, using statistical techniques to assess how the social background and political attitudes of judges shaped their decisions.

While most of the famous names of comparative politics until this time had been American men – including Charles Merriam, Gabriel Almond, Seymour Martin Lipset, Lucien Pye, and Samuel Huntington – new influence was asserted by scholars with European backgrounds and interests, including Giovanni Sartori (Italy), Stein Rokkan (Norway), Maurice Duverger (France), and Arend Lijphart (the Netherlands). There was also more transfer of ideas between the study of domestic and comparative politics, and new interests were added with the break-up of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in 1989–91, the emergence of the European Union, the new interest in gender issues, and the growing importance of states such as Brazil, China, India, Mexico, and South Africa. The community of comparativists began to become more diverse.

Just as quickly, there was a reaction against the efforts by behaviouralists to develop a **grand theory** of comparative politics. A difference of opinion also developed between scholars favouring qualitative and quantitative approaches (see later in this chapter for more details). More differences emerged as rational choice approaches became popular (see Chapter 14), further promoting the use of statistical modelling. The divisions reached a point in the late 1990s and early 2000s when there was something of a rebellion among American political scientists against what they described as the 'mathematicization of political science', and the particular marginalization of comparative politics. Named for the changes then taking place in the Soviet Union, an informal 'Perestroika movement' emerged that pressed for multiple methods and approaches, and for new efforts to broaden political science in the search for greater relevance (Monroe, 2005).

Grand theory: A broad and abstract form of theorizing that incorporates many theories and tries to explain broad areas of a discipline rather than more focused matters.

Some of the frustration is illustrated by the difficulty of answering the critical question of what causes democratization. Finding an answer might be considered the Holy Grail of political research; armed with such knowledge, we might be able to reproduce the conditions needed to move the world more rapidly and sustainably towards a democratic future. In her review of research on the question, though, Geddes (2007) is only able to identify some tendencies and to rule out others: richer countries are more likely to be democratic (but development does not cause democratization, although modernization might – see *Using Theory 2*), as are countries that were once British colonies, but reliance

on oil reduces the chances, as does having a large Muslim population. 'Given the quality and amount of effort expended on understanding democratization,' Geddes concludes, 'it is frustrating to understand so little.' To complicate matters, we are now – as we will see in Chapters 5 and 6 – seeing something of a turn away from democracy in several parts of the world.

USING THEORY 2

MODERNIZATION

Why are some countries democratic and others not? What, in other words, are the economic and social requisites of sustainable democracy? Modernization theory is a way of addressing such questions by focusing on the idea that traditional societies develop progressively as they adopt more modern practices, and that democracy flourishes in **modern** high-income industrial or post-industrial states with an educated population. By contrast, middle-income states are more likely to be flawed democracies, and low-income countries are more likely to be authoritarian. The classic statement of the impact of **modernization** was offered by the American political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset (1959), who suggested that 'the more well-to-do a [country], the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy'. Among his explanations:

- Wealth softens class differences, producing a more equal distribution of income and reducing the likelihood of class conflict. (With its pervasive economic and social inequalities, the United States disproves this argument.)
- Economic security improves the quality of governance by reducing incentives for corruption.
- Education and urbanization make a difference, because education encourages democratic and tolerant values, while towns and cities have always been the wellsprings of democracy.

Modern: A state with an industrial or post-industrial economy, affluence, specialized occupations, social mobility, and an urban and educated population.

Modernization: The process of acquiring the attributes of a modern society, or one reflecting contemporary ideas, institutions, and norms.

Although Lipset's argument has been contested by some, particularly those who argue that global capitalism has been a major cause of political and economic underdevelopment, most continue to agree with his conclusions. Diamond and Marks (1992), for example, suggested that the level of economic development continued to be 'the single most powerful predictor of the likelihood of democracy'. Research by Boix (2003) led him to conclude that 'democracy prevails when either economic equality or capital mobility are high in a given country', while authoritarianism prevailed in countries where levels of equality were low. More recently, Luce (2017) argued that democracy's 'strongest glue' was economic growth:

> When groups fight over the fruits of growth, the rules of the political game are relatively easy to uphold. When those fruits disappear, or are monopolized by a fortunate few, things turn nasty.

Inevitably, there continue to be exceptions to this rule, both apparent and real. On the one hand, the record of the oil-rich kingdoms of the Middle East (among the wealthiest countries in the world when measured by per capita GDP) suggests that affluence, and even mass affluence, is no guarantee of democracy. On the

other hand, Botswana and Mongolia are both democratic regimes (albeit flawed versions) despite being relatively poor in per capita GDP terms, and despite sharing borders with authoritarian regimes. These seemingly contradictory cases suggest that modernity consists of more than income per head, and these numbers also overlook the importance of political culture in helping explain contrasting levels of democracy (see Chapter 4).

In looking at the causes and effects of modernization, it is also worth considering the causes and effects of democratization (see *Using Theory 4*). Neither concept is yet fully understood, but one quality they have in common is that both are based mainly on the experience of Western societies, and the manner in which their political, economic, and social systems evolved from the 1600s to the present day. Both concepts are also implicitly connected to Westernization, despite the fact that the landscape of political and economic change has changed so much in the last few decades. It is more than time that both modernization and democratization were divorced from their Western roots and understood more broadly.

One critical problem with approaches to comparative government and politics (and to studies of government and politics in general) is their long association with Western ideas. This was a phenomenon noted by Parel (1992) when he argued that the scholarship of political theory was so focused on Western political thought that there was a prevailing assumption that modern Western texts were 'products of universal reason itself'. He also noted that Western claims of universality were being questioned by other cultures, and argued that comparative political philosophy meant taking an approach that paid more attention to cultural and philosophical pluralism. This point was later taken up by Dallmayr (1999) when he argued that practitioners of political thought rarely moved outside the cultural boundaries of North America and Europe in the direction of 'genuine comparative investigation'.

Much has changed in recent decades. There has been more research published on a wider variety of states, and the sub-field of comparative politics has become broader and more eclectic, with new concepts and ideas regularly shaking up old assumptions. Studies of democratic regimes still greatly outnumber those of authoritarian regimes, and studies of bigger and/or older states – with larger communities of political scientists – still greatly outnumber those of smaller and/or newer states. Men have historically dominated the profession of political science and it is unfortunate that the resulting gender imbalance continues to affect political thinking to this day. New generations of female scholars, however, are bringing new perspectives that broaden the value of comparative politics; the works of Barbara Geddes and Jennifer Gandhi, for example, are quoted often in this book.

Comparison has clearly had to catch up with the evolving realities of government and politics around the world, including the changing role of the state, the rise of new economic powers, the impact of new technology and globalization, the new political role of Islam, the impact of failed and failing states, the resurgence of nationalism (see Chapter 3), and now with the apparent democratic

recession taking place in several parts of the world. While the changes within the sub-field have been positive and productive, however, and comparative politics now uses a greater range of theoretical and methodological approaches than ever before, and is influenced by a greater diversity of ideas and perspectives, many opportunities still remain to deepen and broaden our understanding.

CHOOSING CASES

Comparative government and politics not only have a choice of different theoretical approaches (as we will see in the *Using Theory* features used throughout this book), but also have a choice of different approaches to **methodology**. And just as there are differences of opinion among scholars about the best theoretical approaches to comparison, so there are differences of opinion about the best way of realizing the potential of comparison (Munck and Snyder, 2007). Among the questions we have to ask are the following:

Methodology: The body of methods used, or the means used, to undertake the study of a phenomenon or a problem.

- What is our **unit of analysis**? In other words, what is it that we want to compare? We could, for example, be studying states, institutions, processes, principles, movements, electoral systems, themes, or an area of policy.
- What is our **level of analysis**? We could look at anything from the relations among and between states down through groups or social classes to politics at the individual level.

Unit of analysis: The object of study in comparative politics.

Level of analysis: The level of study in comparative politics, ranging from the macro (political system) level to the micro (individual) level.

The most important question, though, and the one that first comes to mind, concerns the case (or the cases) that we want to understand: we can choose between one case, a small number of cases (small-*n*), or a large number of cases (large-*n*). The **case study method** is one of the most common strategies in research, being widely used throughout the social and natural sciences, as well as the humanities. The method, says Gerring (2009), involves 'the intensive study of a single case for the purpose of understanding a larger class of cases (a population)'. The focus of that study might be an event, a policy, a person, an institution, or a process.

Case study method: A research method involving detailed study of a particular object and the context within which it exists.

Although it might at first seem odd to suggest that we can compare using a single case, a case is necessarily comparative because – in order to be useful – it needs to be an example of a larger population, against which it can then be juxtaposed: Iran as a case of an Islamic Republic, or Japan as a case of a monarchy, or Brazil as an example of a federal system. Single cases have the advantage of depth, and other researchers can use two or more single-country studies to explore broader similarities and differences. Single cases can also be compared with an ideal type or typology. The greatest advantage of single cases is that they offer an in-depth, real-world understanding of a phenomenon, a clearly defined example that helps to illustrate a wider principle.

Yin (2018) points out that case studies must be understood in terms of both their scope and their features. In terms of scope, they look in depth at a phenomenon within its actual context; case studies are different from experiments, for example, because the latter separate the phenomena to be studied from their

context. In terms of features, case studies help address the problem of too many variables and not enough cases (see later in this chapter) and are broad-ranging in that they rely on multiple sources of evidence.

One key to a successful case study is to be clear about what the case can show us. By its nature, a case is an example of a more general category, such that to examine a case is to undertake an investigation with significance beyond its own boundaries. An account of the Japanese general election of 2021 which does not go beyond the topic of the election itself is a study, not a case. However, an analysis which delves into the significance of the election being one held against a tumultuous period in Japanese politics makes it a case study, offering a detailed illustration of themes of wider interest. It raises interesting questions about the evolution of political parties, about changes in the place of political factionalism, and about the dynamics of states with dominant political parties. The outcome of the election also had international ramifications in that it left Japan with a new leader – Prime Minister Fumio Kishida – whose Liberal Democratic Party maintained a solid majority in Parliament.

By their nature, case studies use a wide range of techniques, including the following:

- Reading the academic literature.
- Examining primary and secondary sources.
- Interviews with participants and other observers in the unit.
- Direct observation, either as a 'fly on the wall' or as a participant.

Anadolu / Contributor

The long tradition of Liberal Democratic Party control of government in Japan is confirmed once again at the 2021 elections, which left the country with a new prime minister: Fumio Kashida, shown (centre) posing before the results board at LDP headquarters on election night.

As King et al. (1994) put it, scholars of cases engage in 'soaking and poking, marinating themselves in minutiae', aiming to provide what Geertz (1973) once called 'thick description', meaning that it is both rounded and detailed. This multi-method approach contrasts with a more specific and explicit approach using a single lens, such as statistical analysis, or an experiment. Unlike statistical analysis, which sets out to identify relationships between variables measured across a series of observations, case analysis aims to identify how a range of factors interact in the context of the example being studied.

Most similar system: A research approach based on explaining a key difference between two or more similar political systems.

In terms of guiding the choice of cases, there are two main broad approaches (see Anckar, 2008). The first is the **most similar system** (MSS), which involves choosing cases that are as similar as possible except in regard to the object of study. The underlying logic, argues Lipset (1990) is that 'the more similar the units being compared, the more possible it should be to isolate the factors responsible for differences between them'. If the units being studied are similar in, say, their history, culture, and government institutions, it should be possible to rule out such common factors as explanations for the particular difference being studied.

An example of the MSS at work is the study by Haesebrouck (2017) that asks why the member states of the European Union have such different attitudes towards engaging in foreign military operations, given that the goals of the EU include the building of common foreign and security policies. Looking at their participation in selected peacekeeping operations, and in military confrontations in Libya and against the Islamic State (ISIS), he concludes that the differences can be explained by a combination of military resources, competing deployments, UN peacekeeping traditions (states with a record of participating in UN peacekeeping are more likely to engage their militaries), and patterns of trade (states with large trade volumes with target countries have a stronger incentive to engage).

Most different system: A research approach based on explaining a key similarity between two or more dissimilar political systems.

The second approach is the **most different system** (MDS), which follows the opposite track by using cases that are different in some way (rich vs. poor, democratic vs. authoritarian, big vs. small, and so on) but that have something in common that needs explaining. The goal is to try and rule out the effect of the differences and to identify the explanations for the similarity. An example of MDS at work is a comparative study (Okma and Tenbensel, 2020) of health care reform in 12 countries (including Chile, Ghana, Israel, New Zealand, Singapore, and Switzerland) that vary significantly in terms of their population size, ethnic composition, wealth, cultural backgrounds, and policy styles. In comparing them, the authors found that – despite their differences – they all shared the overall policy goal of providing universal health care, and also faced similar challenges in the form of budgetary pressures, changing consumer preferences, and changing views about the proper role of the state in health care.

By contrast, one topic on which it might be logical to think that MDS could shed some light – but in which it has failed – is in explaining similar voter turnout rates in clusters of countries that are quite different in terms of their democratic credentials (see Figure 14.6). Why, for example, do Sweden and Turkey (a full democracy and a flawed democracy) have nearly the same high levels of

turnout, and why do Russia and France (an authoritarian regime and a democracy) have nearly the same low levels of turnout? As we will see in Chapter 14, there are multiple explanations for different levels of voter turnout – ranging from the features of political systems to the features of voters – and no one has yet solved the puzzle of the most important determinant of turnout in similar or dissimilar countries.

The choice of cases can also be shaped by what we are trying to understand or show, and in this regard there are four particular case types that stand out in comparative politics – see summary in Table 2.2. Of these, the *representative case* is the most common. This is the workhorse of case studies, as useful as it is undramatic, and often focused on the home country of a researcher. For example, researchers in Finland may be interested in the formation of coalition governments in general, but they opt to study in detail how governments form in this one country, hoping that the resulting research can contribute to broader understandings. A collection of representative case studies can provide the raw material for comparative generalization by other scholars taking a wider approach.

By contrast, a *prototypical case* is chosen not because it is representative but because it is expected to become so. The point here is that studying a pioneer can help us understand a phenomenon which might become more widely significant. One example is the use of social media in elections in the United States, for which the Obama campaign in 2008 was a trend-setter. His campaign may not have been the first to do this, but it was clearly one of the most thorough and effective, setting new standards and exploiting new methods that were quickly adopted elsewhere. Campaigning via social media has become the norm in many democracies, even moving into darker territory with allegations of Russian manipulation of elections in several countries. One of the dangers of a prototypical case is that it is based on a bet on the future, and may come to nothing if it is not adopted more widely. (At which point, presumably, the focus of research can switch to an analysis of why it never took off.)

Where the study of prototypical cases looks to the future, *exemplary cases* look to the past in the sense that they are the archetypes that are considered to have generated the category of which they are taken as representative. For

Table 2.2: Types of case study

Type	Quality	Example
Representative	Typical of the category.	Coalition governments in Finland.
Prototypical	Expected to become typical.	The use of social media in US election campaigns.
Exemplary	Created the category.	The British Parliament.
Deviant	Exception to the rule.	China as a large country that is not a federation.

example, the parliamentary system was born in Britain, and thus a study of the features of the British Parliament is a good point of departure when looking for insights into the manner in which legislatures and executives work in all those countries using this system. In similar fashion, the French presidency does much more than give us insights into the semi-presidential system of government: it is also the model upon which other semi-presidential systems – such as those in Russia, Ukraine, and several former French colonies in Africa – were later based.

Finally, the purpose of studying a *deviant case* is to seek out the exceptional and the atypical, rather than the usual: the few countries which remain communist, for example, or poor countries that have managed to be democratic, or those where the military is still in power. Deviant cases are often used to tidy up our understanding of exceptions and anomalies. Why does India contradict the thesis that democracy presupposes prosperity? Why did Switzerland adopt a federal administrative system when most federations are found in large countries? Conversely, why is China – the largest country in the world by population – not a federation? (The answer to this can be found in Chapter 11.) Why has voter turnout stayed high in Sweden and Denmark (about 85–90 per cent in recent elections) while it has only been about 65–70 per cent in neighbouring Finland? Deviant cases always attract interest and, by providing a contrast with the norm, enhance our understanding of representative examples. Since the exceptional tends to the exotic, however, the danger is over-study: comparative politics should be more than a collection of curiosities.

Whichever option we choose, case studies are the building blocks from which we build our understanding of the political world. As a result, much comparative political analysis takes the form of drawing analogies between cases. For example, what are the similarities and differences between the causes of the Russian, Chinese, and Iranian revolutions? Why does the plurality electoral system produce a two-party system in the United States but a multi-party system in India? How has Botswana managed to sustain its position as a flawed democracy (ranking higher on the Democracy Index than Italy, Belgium, and Hungary) while its near-neighbours Angola, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe are all authoritarian regimes?

CHOOSING METHODS

Once we have chosen our case, or cases, the next decision concerns the best method of comparison to use: the most common are the qualitative method, the quantitative method, the historical method, or some blend of the three (see Table 2.3 for a summary). They can all be applied to a single case, but they are particularly useful in helping address the challenges that can arise from comparing small-*n* or large-*n* sets.

Qualitative method: A research method based on studying a few cases within their natural setting, with an emphasis on values, opinions, behaviour, and context.

Qualitative method

The research approach most often associated with comparison is the **qualitative method**. In contrast to the quantitative method, with its emphasis on statistical analysis, the qualitative approach focuses on gathering non-numerical data

Table 2.3: Comparative political research methods

Method	Focus	Features
Qualitative	Cases	Holistic comparison of two or more cases within their natural settings. Depth emphasized over breadth.
Quantitative	Variables	Statistical assessments of the relationships between variables involving large-*n* sets of cases. Breadth emphasized over depth.
Historical	Processes	Studies cases over time, tracing the process leading to a known outcome.

and analysing it in order to build an understanding of the values, beliefs, and motivation of individuals and communities. It focuses on the explanatory 'why' of social phenomena rather than the 'what', and tends to emphasize depth over breadth, and to study phenomena within their natural setting. Although it can involve comparing many cases, it most often concentrates on the in-depth examination of small-*n* sets. Meaning is allowed to emerge from the objects of study, and observation is the main means of data collection. For Hennink et al. (2020), the most distinctive feature of qualitative research is to allow a researcher to identify issues from the perspective of the participants in their study, and 'to understand the meanings and interpretations that they give to behaviour, events or objects'.

Qualitative research tends to rely on interviews, focus groups, surveys, content analysis, and field observation, aimed at understanding how the objects of study (people or institutions, for example) fit within their environments. The data gathered can include documents, photos, video, and audio recordings. It has the advantage of flexibility (adapting to circumstances as new patterns or ideas emerge during research) and of gathering data in natural and real-world settings, but it has several disadvantages: these include the time and labour involved in checking data, the limited generalizability of small samples, and a number of research biases, including the observer bias that can happen when a researcher's values, opinions, or expectations shape the way they approach their research.

There are any number of examples in this book of questions asked from a qualitative perspective: why do voters change their minds on the political parties they support from one election to another, how do citizens rationalize their support for populist political leaders that may actually be working against their interests, why are some political leaders less honest and more interested in power than others, what explains the declining identification of voters with political parties, and so on. Questions such as these are often best asked by understanding motives than by running numbers.

Quantitative method

In contrast to the view taken by the qualitative method, often using a small number of cases in their natural setting, the **quantitative method** usually emphasizes breadth over depth, and uses statistical analysis to understand a

Quantitative method: A research method using more cases, more variables, and attempting to explain political phenomena using statistical analysis.

Variable: A changeable feature, factor, quantity, or element.

Dependent variable: The factor or element we wish to explain.

Independent variable: The factor or element believed to influence the dependent variable. There are often many such variables.

Correlation: A relationship between two or more variables or attributes. Correlation, however, does not always prove causation.

Regression line: The line of best fit in a scatterplot, summarizing the relationship between two variables.

large-*n* set of cases. It tries to quantify data and to generalize the results to a larger population, generates information through experiments and survey research, and demands a familiarity with statistical methods. It calls for different skills than the qualitative approach and is more likely to suffer from the variable quality and availability of data from multiple cases, but the results often provide more breadth.

The most basic form of quantitative research is counting numbers. For example: how many federations are there, how many countries have conservative governments, or how many of the countries that were classified by the Democracy Index as full democracies in 2014 were flawed democracies ten years later? Once we go beyond the basics, though, we enter the more analytical world of **variables**, which can be either **dependent** or **independent**.

To illustrate this method at work, consider the example in Figure 2.1, which is a scatterplot showing the relationship between the number of members in a national legislature (the dependent variable) and a country's population (the independent variable). The simple question being asked is whether population size impacts the size of the legislature, and the graph reveals a modest positive **correlation**: the larger the population, the larger the legislature. The findings are summarized in the graph by calculating a **regression line**: the line giving the best fit to the data, and which is determined by a formula linking the two variables.

In this case, the equation reveals that, on average, the size of a legislature increases by a factor of one for each increment of a million in a country's population. Given such an equation, which also gives a base estimate for assembly size given a notional population of zero, we can use the population of any particular

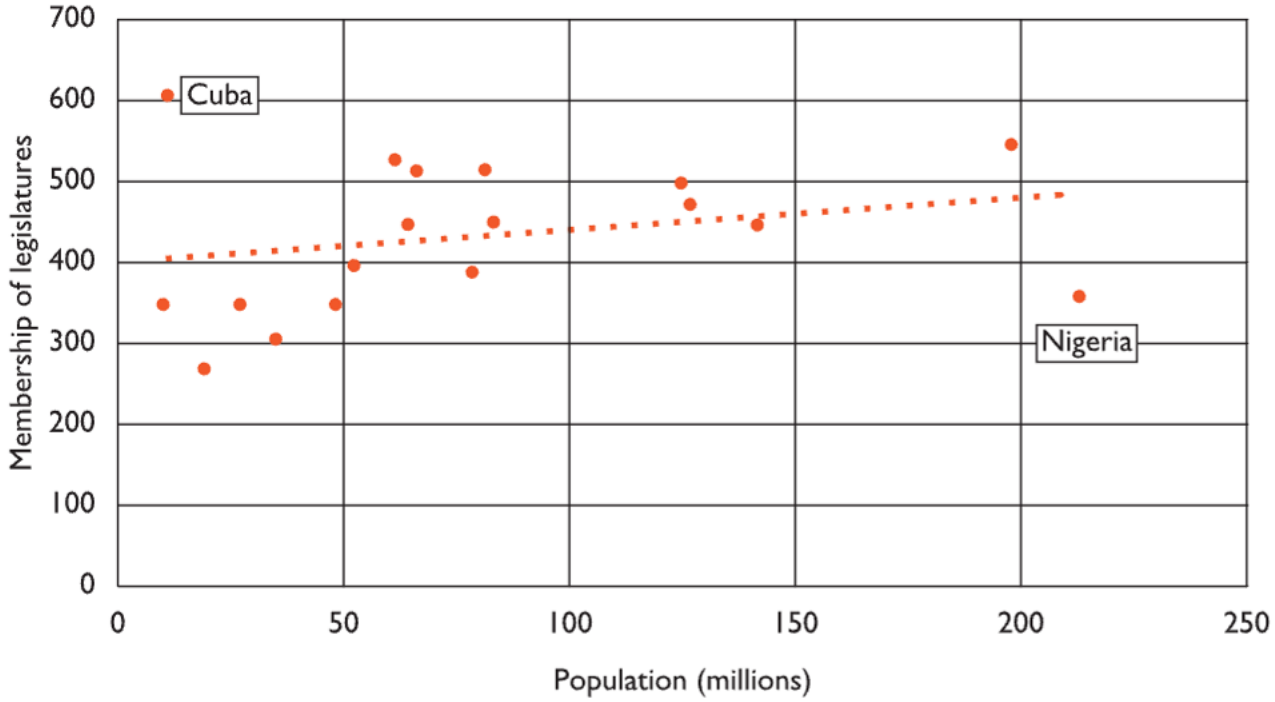


Figure 2.1 Population and the size of legislatures

Sources: Membership of legislatures from Inter-Parliamentary Union (2024); population size from World Bank (2024). Membership of legislatures refers to lower chamber only.

country to predict its approximate legislative size. (If there had been a negative correlation, the regression line would have sloped down rather than up: in that unlikely case, a larger population would be associated with a smaller legislature.)

Outlier: The observation furthest away from the value predicted by a regression line.

One important virtue of a regression line is that it allows us to identify **outliers**. In our example, the larger the difference between the predicted and the actual size of a legislature, the greater the need for additional explanation, thus providing a link to deviant case analysis. In the data in Figure 2.1, Nigeria has a legislature that is smaller per head of population than most: it has 360 members in a country with about 210 million people, or one representative for 580,000 people. This undersize is a reflection in part of its federal structure; federations tend to have smaller national legislatures because their people are also represented in state/provincial legislatures. Conversely, Cuba's National Assembly of People's Power is large per head of population; it has 612 members in a country with just over 11 million people, or one representative for 18,000 people, giving Cubans a higher level of per capita representation than almost any other country in the world. This could be because communist states created large legislatures as a way of reducing any threat they might pose to the party's power, giving us a plausible hypothesis for further investigation.

Historical method

Historical method: A research method based on studying cases from the past, often with a focus on their development through time.

By drawing from history, the **historical method** (see Lange, 2013) not only provides more cases to study, but also helps us better understand the historical roots of today's political systems. A well-known example of this approach is the historical analysis by the Harvard political scientist Theda Skocpol (1979) of revolutions in France, Russia, and China. These three cases had quite different political, economic, and social systems, so she set out to ask what they had in common that would produce a similar political outcome. Her conclusion: regimes that were internationally weak and domestically ineffective became vulnerable to insurrection when well-organized agitators succeeded in exploiting peasant frustration with an old order to which the landed aristocracy offered only limited support.

An example of looking to history to better understand the present is offered by the case of Iran and its troubled relationship with the West. At first glance, it can appear that Iranians are over-concerned with criticizing the West, and the instinctive reaction of Western political leaders is to reward Iran's frustrations with criticism, mistrust, and an unwillingness to engage. History tells us, though, that while Iran was never a colony, its perspective is still coloured by the long history of Western interference in its politics and economics, and narratives on both sides have been altered, recycled, and manipulated to fit different agendas (Whiskin, 2018). It is only through an historical analysis of this kind that the present can be understood in terms of the past; see *Spotlight 2* on Iran at the end of this chapter.

Counterfactual: A thought experiment speculating on possible outcomes if a particular factor had been absent from a process, or an absent factor had been present.

A more focused and speculative version of the historical method is to ask hypothetical 'What if …?' questions known as **counterfactuals**. What, for example, would our world be like if someone else other than Vladimir Putin had become president of Russia, or if the attacks of 9/11 had never happened, or if Xi Jinping had not reversed the political trends begun in China by his

predecessors? Tetlock and Belkin (1996) have developed useful guidelines for judging the plausibility of counterfactuals, but it can be difficult to test the outcome of such thought experiments against reality.

THE CHALLENGES OF COMPARISON

As we saw in Chapter 1, comparison broadens our understanding of the political world, leads to improved classifications, and improves the potential for accurate explanation and even prediction. As we have seen in this chapter, there are different approaches to using cases and variables in comparative study. Despite the variety of advantages and options, though, the sheer breadth of comparison brings its own challenges, of which four in particular stand out (summarized in Table 2.4).

Too few cases, too many variables

This is a problem for those who think of comparative politics as a version of the experimenter's laboratory, in which researchers patiently seek to isolate the impact of a single variable. As outlined by Lijphart (1971), it arises when a researcher wants to control for many variables at the same time and quickly runs out of cases. In other words, there are more explanatory factors for a given outcome than there are cases available to study. Even with nearly 200 sovereign states, we do not have enough cases to allow political comparisons to be as precise as laboratory experiments. To make the same point from another angle, we will never be able to test all possible explanations of the political differences between states.

Why, for example, have green political parties done so much better in some countries than in others, even in neighbouring countries with almost identical economic structures and bodies of environmental law? Looking just at member states of the European Union, for example, green parties have done better in Austria, Belgium, and Germany than in France or Italy. The greens have also done well in Latvia, where Prime Minister Indulis Emsis in 2004 became the

Table 2.4: The challenges of comparison

Challenge	Qualities
Too few cases, too many variables	There are more explanatory factors for a given outcome than there are cases available to study.
Selection bias	The cases selected for study might be unrepresentative, limiting the significance of the findings.
Understanding meaning	The 'same' phenomenon can mean different things in different countries, creating difficulties in comparing like with like.
Globalization	States are independent entities, but the influence of globalization on processes and systems within states means that they cannot operate independently, thus reducing the number of cases available for testing theories.

first green head of government in the world, and President Raimonds Vējonis in 2015 became the first green head of state in the world. There are many possible explanations for these contrasts between countries, including post-material values (see Chapter 6), levels of education, national cultural traditions, electoral systems, the extent of pollution, the political skill with which green parties have pursued their agendas, and the diffusion of environmental ideas across national boundaries. With so many potential explanations, and only a limited set of country cases, though, clear conclusions are difficult.

Selection bias

A second handicap to comparison is **selection bias**, which can happen whenever the units of analysis are chosen intentionally rather than randomly. In these circumstances, the danger is that these units are unrepresentative of the wider population and, as a result, findings may not be generalizable to the broader category from which the cases are drawn. For example, studies of English-speaking democracies are unrepresentative of all democracies, and studies of political parties in sub-Saharan Africa are untypical of those in Europe or Latin America. As a result, we may end up making misleading assumptions about the countries we are comparing by not being sufficiently inclusive (see *Exploring Problems 2*). Given the rarity of random sampling in qualitative comparisons, the point is not so much to eliminate such bias as to be aware of its presence and effects.

Selection bias: A problem that arises when selected cases and variables are unrepresentative of the wider class from which they are drawn.

Four particular forms of selection bias raise their own unique problems:

- *Value bias* arises when researchers allow themselves to be guided by factors such as politics, culture, race, gender, religion, age, economic situation, and other values. This is a particular problem in comparative studies, because other than the country or countries in which researchers have spent most or all of their lives, they will know little directly about the objects of their study, and they face the danger of seeing other countries through the lenses of their own experiences, values, and learning.
- ***Confirmation bias*** arises when researchers have a view in mind before they start their research, and pay attention only to the facts and analyses that support that view, ignoring or downplaying any contrary evidence. In regard to the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, it was common to see supporters and opponents of mask mandates and vaccinations seizing on studies that supported their beliefs, while overlooking findings that ran against their positions. Whether it is conscious or unconscious, confirmation bias has the effect of producing skewed results and conclusions.

Confirmation bias: The tendency to seek out or interpret information that confirms pre-existing beliefs and attitudes, and to ignore information that does not.

- *Survivorship bias* arises when non-survivors of a process are excluded from study. For example, studying the few surviving communist states or military governments as representative of the entire class of such regimes (past and present) is a mistake because the few that still survive may be quite different from those that have gone. In designing our research, we need to look at starters as well as finishers, at casualties as well as survivors.
- *Access bias* occurs as a result of the differences in ease of access to information on different case study countries discussed in *Using Theory 1*. If researchers choose to study those countries which speak their language, or

EXPLORING PROBLEMS 2

HOW CAN OUR COMPARISONS BE INCLUSIVE?

In *Exploring Problems 1*, the question posed was how we can be sure that we are taking a global approach to comparison by working around the unequal quantities of information available on the different countries of the world. A related question – addressed here – is how we can make sure that our comparisons are as inclusive and as accurate as possible, and not guided or restricted by our own particular perspective on the world, or the perspectives that drove the collation of the data that we use as the basis of our comparison.

As we saw earlier in this chapter, the world of comparative government and politics is far broader than it was when it focused on just a few countries, and there are numerous comparative topics in which there is still room to be a pioneer and push forward the boundaries of understanding. In trying to grasp all the changes and the possibilities, though, there is still the danger of looking at events from the perspective of who we are (whether we are guided by our age, gender, religion, ethnicity, or nationality), and of being guilty of generalizations and stereotypes.

Few parts of the world have been subject to more persistent generalizations than Africa, and no one has more cogently summarized the resulting problems than the Kenyan author Binyavanga Wainaina. In a short essay titled 'How to Write about Africa' (2005), he poked fun at the stereotypes that outsiders often use in the way they write about the continent. Here is an excerpt:

> In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country. It is hot and dusty with rolling grasslands and huge herds of animals and tall, thin people who are starving. Or it is hot and steamy with very short people who eat primates. Don't get bogged down with precise descriptions. Africa is big: fifty-four countries, 900 million people who are too busy starving and dying and warring and emigrating to read your book. The continent is full of deserts, jungles, highlands, savannahs and many other things, but your reader doesn't care about all that, so keep your descriptions romantic and evocative and unparticular.

Wainaina reminds us of some of the problems that comparativists must wrestle with on a regular basis, and his concerns raise important questions for comparative politics, including these:

- How can we avoid these kinds of stereotypes?
- How many perspectives can we reasonably and practically account for as we compare?
- How can we avoid making mistaken assumptions about places and cultures of which we are not a part?
- How well can we understand a society that we have never personally visited?

which they feel are safe to visit, or on which the most research has already been done, then countries in which it is more difficult to conduct research – including, for example, Afghanistan, Haiti, North Korea, Syria, and Turkmenistan – will receive less attention. The result of access bias is that published work is unrepresentative of all states.

One virtue of large-*n* statistical designs is that they reduce the risk of selection bias. If a study was to cover every existing state, selection bias should disappear altogether, although the problem may just resurface in another form, through an unrepresentative selection of variables, rather than countries. For example, much statistical research in comparative politics relies on data collected by governments, think tanks, and international bodies whose priorities are often economic rather than political. The result is that financial and economic variables receive more attention, and politics runs the risk of being treated as a branch of economics.

Understanding meaning

Because the meaning of a political action depends on the traditions and conventions of the state concerned, comparing like with like is not always as straightforward as it seems. The cultural approach discussed in *Using Theory 6* plays an important role here. Before we begin any cross-national comparison, we need to be sure that we understand the relevant cultural codes of the states we are studying, otherwise we run the risk of cultural imperialism, in which the meaning of an action in our home state is incorrectly projected onto other societies.

AFP / Stringer

A scuffle breaks out among members of the Taiwanese legislature. What kind of meaning should comparativists attach to the number of such scuffles in some legislatures and their absence in others?

Take, for example, the question of styles of political representation, which vary across states. Where Nigerian politicians might seek to impress their supporters by acts of flamboyant extravagance, Swedish politicians are more likely to set out to affirm their ordinariness. The same goal of impressing constituents is achieved by culturally specific means, such that what works in Abuja (the capital of Nigeria) might be disastrous in Stockholm (the capital of Sweden), and what succeeds in Stockholm might be met with apathy in Abuja.

Similarly, when members of a legislature vote against their party's line, the consequences can range by state from complete indifference to expulsion from the party. What appears to be the same act carries varying significance, and thus meaning depends on context. Meaning and context also come into play in comparing the incidence of violence in national legislatures. Why is it, for example, that brawls have occasionally broken out among legislators in Italy, Mexico, South Korea, Turkey, Ukraine, and Venezuela, but that they are rare – if unknown in recent history – in most other parts of the world. What, if anything, do the countries on this list have in common?

Globalization

Globalization: The process by which the links between people, corporations, and governments in different states become integrated through political decisions, trade, investment, and technology.

The final challenge to comparison (if we take the state as the unit of analysis) comes from **globalization** (Teune, 2010). Although 193 independent states belong to the United Nations, in reality these states are interdependent, to different degrees. Countries learn from, copy, compete with, trade with, influence, and sometimes invade each other in a constant process of interaction. One of the results is that government and politics in different countries becomes increasingly similar. (See the discussion about policy diffusion and convergence in Chapter 17.)

Globalization does not affect every state equally, though, as reflected in the results of the KOF Globalization Index maintained by the Swiss Economic Institute. This ranks the countries of the world in terms of the extent to which they are globally connected in political, economic, and social terms. Among other things, Figure 2.2 reveals that it tends to be the smaller democratic regimes with advanced economies – such as Switzerland and the Netherlands – that have the highest levels of global connectivity. Large economies naturally rely more on their domestic market, so in spite of their expansive international trade and investment networks, the United States and Japan remain less globalized, while large emerging powers such as China and India rank even lower. The poorest Asian and African states, perhaps unsurprisingly, sit at the lower reaches of the ranking.

Looking at these numbers, it might be reasonable to conclude that the most globalized states will have the fewest political differences among them, but opinion is divided on the implications of globalization. The sociologist George Ritzer (2021) writes of the McDonaldization of society, suggesting that culture has come to be dominated by the goals of efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control; related arguments could be made about politics and political expectations. Concerns about homogenization have been at least part of the

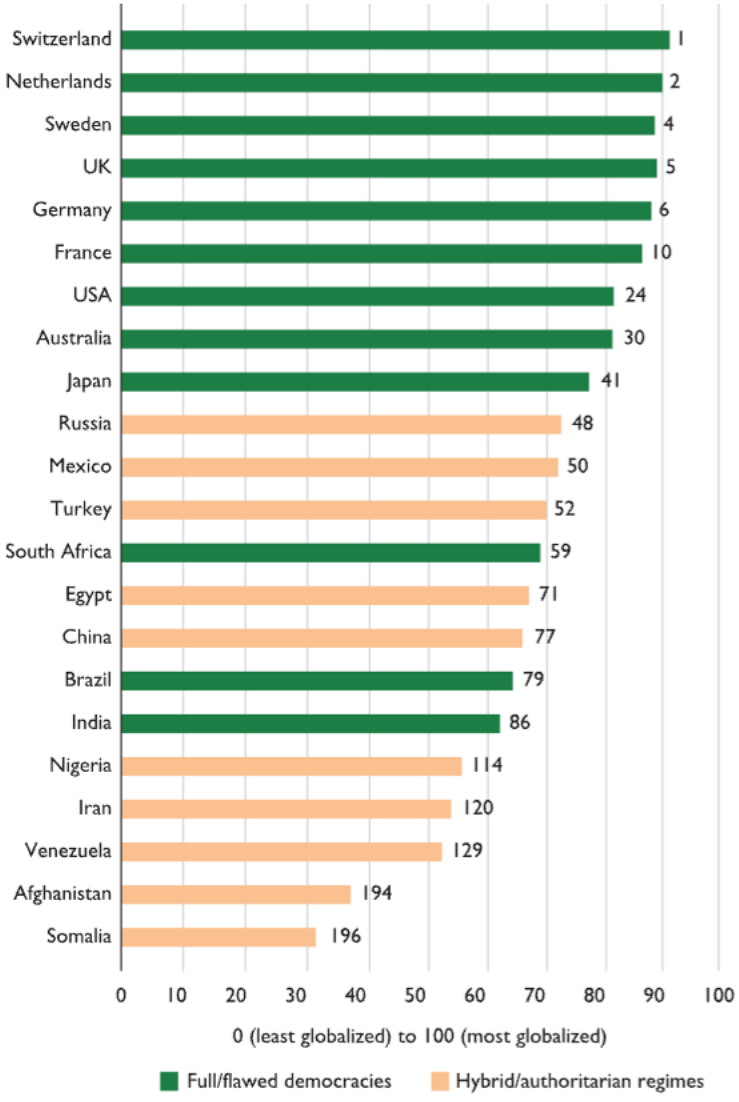


Figure 2.2 The KOF Globalization Index

Source: Based on ETH Zurich (2022). Figures at the end of bars indicate ranking out of 196. For the latest information, see Swiss Economic Institute at https://kof.ethz.ch.

explanation for the political backlash as nationalists in countries such as Britain, France, the United States, India, and the Philippines work to reassert the sovereignty of states in the face of globalization (see Chapter 3 for more discussion).

Our connections are emphasized by the way in which the major transitions of world history – including industrialization, colonialism, decolonization, democratization, and globalization – unfolded on a world stage. In that sense we inhabit one global system, rather than a world of independent states. Green (2002) puts the point well when he says the world is arranged 'as if national polities are in fact cells of a larger entity with a life all its own'. This idea of cells is reflected in the diffusion of ideas: the presidential systems of Latin America were imported from the United States, prime ministers and parliaments grew out of the specific circumstances of British political history, and the ombudsman (see Chapter 10) was a device copied from Sweden. The work of international organizations, from the United Nations to the European Union, also creates another layer of governance to which all member states must react.

These links do not invalidate comparative analysis; indeed, they allow studies comparing the impact of an international factor on different states, thus bridging the study of international and comparative politics. Interdependence, though, creates technical difficulties for statistical analysis. Treating states as independent entities artificially inflates the effective sample size in statistical research, resulting in exaggerated confidence in the significance of the results obtained (Tilly, 1997). To put the point more intuitively, treating states as separate can lead to false inferences if in reality they are all subject to a common external influence, such as globalization.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What does it take for the study of politics to be scientific, and where is it most likely to fail?
- In what way (or ways) could your country serve as a representative or deviant case study?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of quantitative and qualitative approaches to comparative political research?
- How does the study of politics differ from the study of history?
- How can comparative political research best be protected from value bias?
- What challenges does globalization pose for comparative politics?

KEY CONCEPTS

- Behaviouralism
- Case study method
- Comparative method
- Confirmation bias
- Correlation
- Counterfactual
- Critical thinking
- Dependent variable
- Empirical approach
- Globalization
- Grand theory
- Historical method
- Independent variable
- Level of analysis
- Methodology
- Modern
- Modernization
- Most different system
- Most similar system
- Normative approach
- Outlier
- Qualitative method
- Quantitative method
- Regression line
- Selection bias
- Unit of analysis
- Variable

FURTHER READING

Cresswell, John W., and J. David Cresswell (2018) *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th edn (SAGE). A textbook survey of how to approach research, including chapters on the use of theory and the different methods available.

Gray, David E. (2022) *Doing Research in the Real World*, 5th edn (SAGE). A general guide to undertaking research, offering detail on many of the topics covered in this chapter.

Halperin, Sandra, and Oliver Heath (2020) *Political Research: Methods and Practical Skills*, 3rd edn (Oxford University Press). An introduction to the methods, goals, and approaches used in political research.

Landman, Todd, and Edzia Carvalho (2017) *Issues and Methods in Comparative Politics*, 4th edn (Routledge). A concise survey of comparative methods and approaches, including chapters on particular themes in comparative politics.

Lowndes, Vivien, David Marsh, and Gerry Stoker (eds) (2018) *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, 4th edn (Palgrave). Includes chapters on most of the theoretical approaches introduced in this chapter.

Yin, Robert K. (2018) *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*, 6th edn (SAGE). A standard source on conducting case studies, using examples from a range of disciplines.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Visit **bloomsbury.pub/comparative-government-and-politics-13e** to access additional materials to support teaching and learning.

SPOTLIGHT 2
IRAN

PROFILE

Iran has long played a critical role in the Middle East, first because of the oil reserves that the British long sought, then because of the close strategic relationship between the United States and the regime of the Shah of Iran, and now because of the significance of the Islamic Republic (created in 1979) in the geopolitics of the region. It has an elected president and legislature, but power is manipulated by an unelected Supreme Leader surrounded by competing cliques, while candidates for public office are vetted, laws must be approved by an unelected clerical-juridical council, political rights are limited, and women are marginalized. It is a relatively poor country that controls enormous oil and mineral wealth and is socially diverse. Even if most Iranians are joined by a shared religion, they are still divided between those espousing conservative and reformist views. These differences are strongly structured by gender, generation, and level of education.

Form of government	Unitary Islamic republic. Date of state formation debatable, and most recent constitution adopted 1979.
Executive	Presidential. President elected for maximum of two consecutive four-year terms, but shares power with a Supreme Leader appointed for life by an Assembly of Experts (effectively an electoral college), who must be an expert in Islamic law, and acts as head of state with considerable executive powers.
Legislature	Unicameral Majlis, with 290 members elected for renewable four-year terms.
Judiciary	Supreme Court with members appointed for five-year terms. The Iranian legal system is based on a combination of Islamic law (*sharia*) and civil law.
Electoral system	Single-member plurality for the legislature, simple majority for the president.
Parties	Only Islamist parties can operate legally, but organizations that resemble parties operate regardless. They are not formal political parties as conventionally understood, however, and instead operate as loose coalitions representing conservative and reformist positions.
Population	89 million
Gross Domestic Product	$413 billion
Per capita GDP	$4.670
Democracy Index rating	Authoritarian
Freedom House rating	Not Free
Corruption score	24/100
Human Development Index rating	High

CASE STUDY: HISTORY AND POLITICS IN IRAN

Fully understanding the political systems of different countries demands knowing as much as possible about the history of those systems: their origins, how they evolved, the key influences that shaped them, and how that history is reflected in approaches to government and politics today. In few cases is this illustrated more clearly than with Iran, whose troubled place in the global system can only be fully appreciated by understanding its past.

BEHROUZ MEHRI / Staff

Iranian schoolgirls wave national flags during the anniversary celebrations of the Islamic revolution in Tehran's Azadi Square (Freedom Square). Understanding Iran today is closely tied to understanding the motives behind the revolution, and its effects.

What is now Iran had a long history as part of the Achaemenid, Persian, and Sassanid empires, before being converted to Islam in the seventh century. Even in the face of that conversion, Persians protected their language and culture, helping shape the new Islamic order while remaining distinctive within that order. More changes came with the influence of the Seljuk Turks and the Mongols under Genghis Khan (c. 1158–1227), and by the nineteenth century Persia had become caught up in British and Russian competition for influence in Central Asia.

British control over Persian oil resources tightened, the country was renamed Iran in 1936, and US interest grew after World War II. Foreign influence in Iran was exemplified by Western collusion in a coup that toppled the nationalist administration of prime minister Mohammad Mossadeq in 1953, and by Anglo-American support for the unpopular administration of the Shah of Iran. The authoritarianism of the government of the Shah deepened during the 1960s, US influence in the country grew, and while new oil profits meant more power for the Shah, ordinary Iranians saw few of the benefits.

Public demonstrations in 1978 led to exile for the Shah, and a revolution that ended nearly 2,500 years of monarchical rule in Persia/Iran. This brought to power a regime under the leadership of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, which declared the formation of an Islamic Republic in April 1979. Tensions have since continued between Iran, on the one hand, and the US and its allies, on the other, neither side trusting the other, and pressure being exerted on Iran to bring a halt to the development of a nuclear power programme and its support for Islamist groups in neighbouring countries.

Further reading

Abrahamian, Ervand (2018) *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge University Press).

Boroujerdi, Mehrzad, and Kourosh Rahimkhani (2018) *Post-revolutionary Iran: A Political Handbook* (Syracuse University Press).

Takeyh, Ray (2021) *The Last Shah: America, Iran and the Fall of the Pahlavi Dynasty* (Council on Foreign Relations).

3

States and nations

CONTENTS

- Understanding states
- Origins and evolution
- The diversity of states
- Understanding nations
- The future of the state

PREVIEW

The most common unit of analysis in comparative government and politics is the state. It is far from the only such unit, because comparison can be made at any level from the local to the international, and can involve any political institution, process, problem, or phenomenon. Even so, the common use of states in comparison means that we need to understand what they are, how they work, how they evolved, the varieties in which they are found, and what their future holds.

This chapter begins with a review of the key features of states, including sovereignty and legitimacy. It then looks at the history of states: how and where they emerged, how the state system evolved, how political relationships have changed both vertically (among rulers and the ruled) and horizontally (among different political communities), and how we reached the present total of nearly 200 independent states. This is followed by an assessment of the diversity that exists among states, and at the causes and effects of the differences in their population, wealth and stability.

The chapter then looks at the related concepts of nations and nationalism, which are important in terms of understanding how states function and how they are regarded by their citizens. Nationalism has taken on a new significance in the wake of globalization, and must be understood in conjunction with states. The chapter ends with an analysis of today's debates over the condition and the future of the state: is it stronger, or weaker, or just changing form?

HIGHLIGHTS

- The state lies at the heart of government and politics, which is why it is so important to understand its features and evolution.
- All states have five defining qualities: government, population, territory, sovereignty, and legitimacy.
- The modern state was born in Europe, and its form was exported to the rest of the world by imperial powers such as Britain, France, and Spain.
- States differ from one another in terms of their population, their wealth, and the reach of their political authority.
- A nation is quite different from a state, even if the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, and nations and states often overlap.
- The condition of the modern state is debatable. Some argue that states remain strong, some that they are declining, and some that they are simply evolving.

UNDERSTANDING STATES

At first glance, Spain might appear to be a stable and successful democracy that has travelled far from the days of the dictatorship of Francisco Franco, who died in 1975. It is ranked as a full democracy by the Democracy Index, and as Free by Freedom House, and has one of the 20 biggest economies in the world. Behind the scenes, though (and increasingly on centre stage), it has become clear that the historical divisions of the country are expressing themselves in movements for independence in several parts of Spain. In few of those regions have the demands been greater than Catalonia, an autonomous and economically dynamic region in the east of the country, around the city of Barcelona. Demands for Catalan independence have gathered speed since the fallout from the 2007–08 global financial crisis, leading to a non-binding self-determination referendum in 2014 that resulted in a large majority in favour. In 2017, an independence referendum won the support of 92 per cent of voters but was declared unconstitutional.

The pressure for independence in Catalonia continues nonetheless, offering a case that poses important questions about the definition of the **state**, the reach of government, and the interests of local communities, particularly nations. Of these, the state is the most important: we feel its effects through the taxes we pay, the laws we must follow, the provision of national and domestic security, the institutions of government, and the controls we face when we travel across international borders. Most of us are citizens of a state, and a quick glance at a map of the world is enough to reveal their borders and their names. Despite this, the state can sometimes be hard to pin down and define, giving it a sometimes shadowy and puzzling personality. Is the state represented by people, institutions, laws, ideas, or a combination of all four?

State:
The legal and political authority of a territory containing a population and marked by borders.

The usual benchmark for understanding the state is the classic definition offered by the German sociologist Max Weber, who in a 1918 lecture described it as 'a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory' (quoted in Gerth and Mills, 1948). There is more to the state than physical force, though, and it is better understood in its modern context, where it can be defined as a legal and political entity with five main elements: a government, a population, a territory, sovereignty, and legitimacy (see Figure 3.1).

Another way of understanding a state is to contrast it with a government: while a state is a political community, a government is the agency that manages that community. Where the government consists of the institutions, rules and processes through which states are governed, the existence of a state creates a mandate for rule which is carried out by the government. Governments come and go, making them concrete but temporary, while states are both more abstract and permanent.

At the heart of the identity of a state is **sovereignty**, a concept which the sixteenth-century French philosopher Jean Bodin (1530–96) described as the unfettered and undivided power to make laws. The word *sovereign* originally meant 'one seated above', meaning that a sovereign body is the one institution unrestricted by higher authority: the highest of the high. As Bodin wrote, the

Sovereignty:
The ability to govern and to make decisions within a political community without reference to external or internal challengers or actors.

Element	Qualities
Government	States have governments with the recognized authority to administer and to represent the state in dealings with other governments.
Population	States contain populations, without whom the territory concerned would be little more than a block of real estate.
Territory	States operate within a fixed territory marked by borders, and control the movement of people, money, and goods across those borders.
Sovereignty	States have supreme authority over their territory and resources, meaning that they are free from external control.
Legitimacy	States are recognized both by their residents and by other states as having jurisdiction and authority within their territory.

Figure 3.1 Elements of a state

sovereign can 'give laws unto all and every one of the subjects and receive none from them'. Sovereignty originally emerged in Europe to justify the attempt by monarchs to consolidate control over kingdoms in which authority had previously been shared with the feudal aristocracy and the Catholic Church. This is why monarchs are still known as sovereigns.

As democracy gained ground in the nineteenth century, so too did the belief that elected assemblies acting on behalf of the people were the true holders of sovereignty. The means of acquiring sovereignty evolved, especially in centralized European countries such as Britain and France. In federations such as Brazil, Germany, India, and the United States, by contrast, the notion of sovereignty is weaker, because authority is shared between the central and regional governments (see Chapter 11). In these circumstances, the idea of sovereignty is diluted, and so too is the concept of the state itself. In fact, the term *state* rarely comes up in conversations about government or politics in the United States except in reference to the 50 states that make up the country. American states, though, are very different from the American state.

Legitimacy: The condition of being legitimate. A legitimate state is one based on authaority, and on a recognition of that authority by its citizens and by other states.

The final feature of the state is **legitimacy**, which builds on, but is broader than, the idea of authority discussed in Chapter 1. When a state is widely accepted by its citizens, and by other states with which it deals, we describe it as legitimate. Thus, we speak of the authority of an official but the legitimacy of a state. Although the word *legitimacy* comes from the Latin *legitimare*, meaning 'to declare lawful', legitimacy is more than mere legality: where legality is a technical matter, referring to whether a rule is made correctly by following proper procedures, legitimacy is a more political concept, referring to whether people accept the authority of a state, without which its very existence is in question. States with a long history and a strong sense of identity will also have deeper legitimacy, while states that are internally divided – particularly on ethnic, cultural, or religious grounds – will be regarded as less legitimate by at least some of its citizens, or by other states.

Role	Features
Law and order	Providing and maintaining the police and criminal justice system.
National security	Ensuring protection from external threats, including the management of the armed forces.
Money	Managing the money supply and interest rates.
Taxes	Collecting taxes and overseeing the spending of public funds.
Trade	Managing and protecting trade interests with other states.
Regulation	Adopting regulations and standards on everything from environmental management to food safety, price controls, and access to alcohol and drugs.
Welfare	Providing welfare in the form of public health care, unemployment benefits, educational subsidies, and assistance to farmers.
Infrastructure	Providing and maintaining basic services such as roads, schools, water and energy supply.
Legal obligations	Meeting the requirements of international law.
Citizenship	Defining and protecting the rights of citizens.

Figure 3.2 The roles of states

Armed with all these features, states have a variety of domestic roles and responsibilities, summarized in Figure 3.2. True, most of these roles are shaped and influenced by governments and by political leaders with their own agendas, but it is ultimately the state that provides the necessary authority. Also inherent in the notion of the state is the idea of **citizenship**, which implies full and equal membership of the political community defined by a state. To be a citizen is to possess rights (such as legal protection) and duties (such as military or community service). This idea is not as clear-cut as it might at first seem, though, because not only is dual citizenship now accepted by many states, but international migration has made state borders more porous. We also have to remember that migration does not automatically lead to a change of citizenship, and that not all of the legal residents of a state are citizens (Hammerstad, 2017). Many of them have only permanent resident status, based on being given a visa or a permanent resident document with conditions and time limits attached.

Citizenship: The idea of being a full member of a state, entitled to the rights and subject to the duties associated with that status, and typically confirmed in a document such as a passport or identity card.

The authority of states is also reflected in their obligations to other states. Most states are members of multiple international organizations – such as the United Nations and its specialized agencies – and have also signed a variety of international treaties. They are expected to meet the terms of membership of these organizations and treaties, and are legally responsible for any breaches or violations. The most serious examples of such breaches include aggression, invasion, and genocide, or actions which involve one state breaching the sovereignty or jurisdiction of another. Given the absence of a world government, it is not easy to punish states for breaking international law, but states are still expected to meet their obligations, and can be suspended or expelled from international organizations for breaking the law.

Map 3.1 States of the world

With all these qualities and roles in mind, it should be easy to identify states on a map of the world and to count their number; see Map 3.1, and consider the questions raised in *Using Theory 3*. The picture, though, is not as clear as we might expect. A benchmark point of reference is the membership roster of the United Nations, which stands at 193. However, this number includes four small European enclave states (Andorra, Liechtenstein, Monaco, and San Marino), which meet the legal definition of a state but, for all practical purposes, are parts of the larger states that surround them. It also excludes several territories – such as Hong Kong, Northern Cyprus, Palestine, Puerto Rico, Taiwan, and Western Sahara – that function much like states but lack either sovereignty and/or legitimacy. Furthermore, there are still a few remaining colonies or overseas territories, such as Bermuda, French Polynesia, Gibraltar, and Puerto Rico, which lack the sovereignty required to be states. Finally, not all states are equal in terms of the degree of control they have over their territories and populations – see discussion later in this chapter about quasi-states and *de facto* states.

ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

The modern state is a mainly Western concept that emerged from the embers of medieval Europe (c. 1000–1500). Before then, government and politics was usually associated with kingdoms, empires, and cities. These were often governed in a personal and decentralized fashion, lacking many of the structured and formal features of today's states, most notably the sovereign authority to rule the population of a specific territory. They also functioned within limited horizons, being influenced only by their near neighbours, and rarely being exposed to ideas about government from further afield.

USING THEORY 3

INTERPRETIVISM

When seen from space, the earth is a mainly blue and white orb with large brown and green continents, along with white polar icecaps. States and human-made borders are invisible. Despite this, we live in a world of states, as we are reminded when we apply for passports, pay taxes, break laws, support national sports teams, or think of ourselves as citizens. However, the state is not a physical entity such as a building or a mountain; it is an idea built over a long period of time by political thinkers and politicians. Just as the idea of the state is socially reinforced, it can also be socially contested ('Why should I need a visa each time I visit Country A?' or 'Why should I be a citizen of Country B rather than Country C?'), leading to gradual changes in the ideas themselves.

This is an example of the interpretive approach to understanding government and politics. It is focused on ideas, a view summarized by Bevir and Rhodes (2004) when they argue that in order 'to understand actions, practices and institutions, we need to grasp the relevant meanings, beliefs and preferences of the people involved'. In other words, as Parsons (2018) puts it, people do some things and avoid others because of the presence of social constructs that filter the way they see the world. These include ideas, beliefs, norms, assumptions, codes, identities, meanings, narratives, and values, which can have one of two effects on government and politics:

- In its strongest version, government and politics consist of the ideas we hold about them. There is no political reality separate from our mental constructions, and no reality which can be examined to reveal the impact of ideas upon it.
- In a more restrained version, ideas are an independent influence on our political world, shaping how we define our interests, goals, allies, and enemies. We act as we do because of how we view the world; if our perspective differed, so would our actions.

There is a clear and useful lesson for comparative politics in the interpretive approach. When we study a political system for the first time, we want to make sense of the activities that comprise the system. What do they mean? What is the context that provides this meaning? Behaviour which has one meaning in one state may have a different meaning elsewhere. For example, offering a bribe may be accepted as normal in one place, but may be regarded as a serious offence in another. Casting a vote may be an act of free choice in a democracy, but of subservience in a dictatorship. Criticizing the president may be routine in one country, but sedition in another. Because the consequences of these acts vary, so does their meaning.

With the interpretive approach to studying government and politics, we seek to identify patterns that abstract from specifics, to develop general statements about executive, electoral, or party systems, for example, which go beyond the facts of a particular case, and to acquire knowledge which goes beyond the understandings held by the participants in that case.

Interpretivism: An approach to the study of government and politics based on the argument that politics is formed by the ideas we have about it.

The modern idea of the state emerged between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, the use of the word *state* – stemming from the Latin *status*, meaning 'condition' or 'manner of standing' – coming into common use towards the end of this period. Even though entities that looked much like states existed in other parts of the world as well, notably China (see Fukuyama, 2011), the modern definition of the state is a construct based mainly on European ideas about sovereignty and autonomy.

If there was any single force that was responsible for the emergence of the state, it was war; for Tilly (1975), 'war made the state and the state made war'. The introduction of gunpowder to Europe in the fourteenth century transformed military scale and tactics, as organized infantry and artillery replaced the knight on horseback. The result was an aggressive, competitive, and expensive European arms race, which obliged rulers to employ administrators to recruit, train, equip, and pay for standing armies, laying the foundation of bureaucracies. Political units became larger, and the growth of bureaucracy meant that local patterns of administration and justice became more uniform. Commerce grew, and rulers began to establish formal diplomatic relations with their foreign counterparts.

If a single event can be identified as marking the beginning of the state system, it was the 1648 Peace of Westphalia. This meeting resulted in the agreement of treaties that brought an end to both the Thirty Years' War in the Holy Roman Empire, and the Eighty Years' War between Spain and the Dutch Republic. It so doing, it made several adjustments to European state borders, gave new definition to the idea of sovereignty, and helped make national secular authority superior to religious edicts from Rome, giving rise to what is often still known as the **Westphalian system**. Several states pre-dated the Peace, including England, Ireland, France, Spain, and Portugal, but one of the results of the agreement was a clearer definition of the borders and powers of states.

Westphalian system: The modern state system that many believe emerged out of the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, based on the sovereignty of states and political self-determination.

As central authority developed in Europe, so did the need for its theoretical justification. Bodin argued that, within society, a single sovereign authority should be responsible for five major functions: law, war and peace, public appointments, judicial appeals, and currency. The sovereign still needed to be subject to limits and controls, though, and here the English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) played a vital role. Locke argued that citizens possessed **natural rights** to life, liberty, and property, and that these rights should be protected by rulers governing through law. Citizens, he continued, agreed to obey the laws of the land, even if only by tacit means such as accepting the protection provided by law. Should rulers violate the natural rights of citizens, the people had the right to resist (Locke, 1690).

Natural rights: Those rights (such as to life, liberty, and property) supposedly given to humans by God or by nature, their existence taken to be independent of government.

Despite these changes, independent states emerged only slowly, and there were barely 20 in existence in 1800 (most of them in Europe and Asia), and barely 30 more had been established by 1900 (mostly in Europe and the Americas). The outlines of the state became more precise, though, especially in Europe. Borders slowly turned into barriers, and lawyers established that a country's territory should extend into the sea as far as the reach of a cannonball, and above its land to the flying height of a hot-air balloon.

The creation by the British of settler colonies (such as the predecessors to Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States) provide early examples of the export of the state idea. The new arrivals ruthlessly supplanted indigenous communities, recreating segments of the European tradition they had brought with them, and, as a result, the political organization of these countries still remains strongly and recognizably Western. Elsewhere, states emerged out of different pressures and with different results: in Latin America, for example, wars of independence created new states in the period 1810–25, such as Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay, but they lacked the liberal basis of their US predecessor. New constitutions were produced but they were neither democratic nor fully implemented.

Economically, the second half of the nineteenth century saw the end of an era of relatively open trade. Stimulated by economic depressions, many European states introduced protectionist trade policies. National markets gained ground against both local and international exchange, meaning that economies became more subject to regulation by central government. Internally, the functions performed by the state expanded to include education, factory regulation, policing, and gathering statistics (literally, 'state facts').

Passports were introduced in Europe during World War I, and to travel across frontiers now became a rite of passage, involving official permission expressed in a government stamp. States bored deeper into their societies, a change that was often fuelled by war – including two world wars – fought between entire states, rather than just between specialized armed forces. To equip military forces demanded unparalleled mobilization of citizens, economies, and societies. The ability to tax effectively and systematically – described by Bräutigam et al. (2008) as 'the central pillar of state capacity' – grew further. Because wars were expensive, tax revenues as a proportion of national product almost doubled in Western states between 1930 and 1945 (Steinmo, 2003).

The end of World War I brought an important wave of state formation in central Europe and the Middle East, with the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman empires. The first of these dissolved into five separate states: Austria, Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia. Meanwhile, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Ukraine declared their independence from Russia. However, with the possible exception of Turkey, founded on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, strong and stable new states failed to develop during this wave. Instead, international politics in the shape of fascism and communism intruded, preventing many of these countries (particularly those annexed by the Soviet Union) from experiencing the continuous and independent state development found in the continent's core.

The end of World War II brought another wave of changes. The internal reach of many states expanded as governments focused increasingly on the welfare of their citizens, the state often accepting responsibility for protecting them from illness, unemployment, and old age; see Chapter 18 for more detail on the welfare state. Meanwhile, the state was going global as the colonial era came to an end; the boundaries of conquest drawn by imperial powers such as Belgium, Britain, France, and Portugal had started to become the frontiers

of independent states. As Armitage (2005) argues, 'the great political fact of global history in the last 500 years is the emergence of a world of states from a world of empires. That fact fundamentally defines the political universe we all inhabit.'

In 1945, there were just over 70 sovereign states in existence, more than half of them in Europe and the Americas. Of these, 51 became founding members of the United Nations, the membership roster of which grew in the wake of independence between 1945 and 1948 for countries such as Burma, Ceylon, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, and the Philippines. Many parts of Africa, the Caribbean, and the Middle East followed, with the result that between 1945 and 1990 nearly 90 new states, almost half the world's current total, were created (see Figure 3.3). Unlike European states that had established their borders through war and diplomacy, though, many of these new states were colonial creations whose imposed borders brought together different ethnic, regional, and religious groups that often had to struggle to cooperate with one another. Many experienced civil wars as a result; examples included Angola, Cyprus, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In extreme but still exceptional cases, the outcome was a fragile – or even failed – state that was unable to execute its core task of keeping order (see later in this chapter).

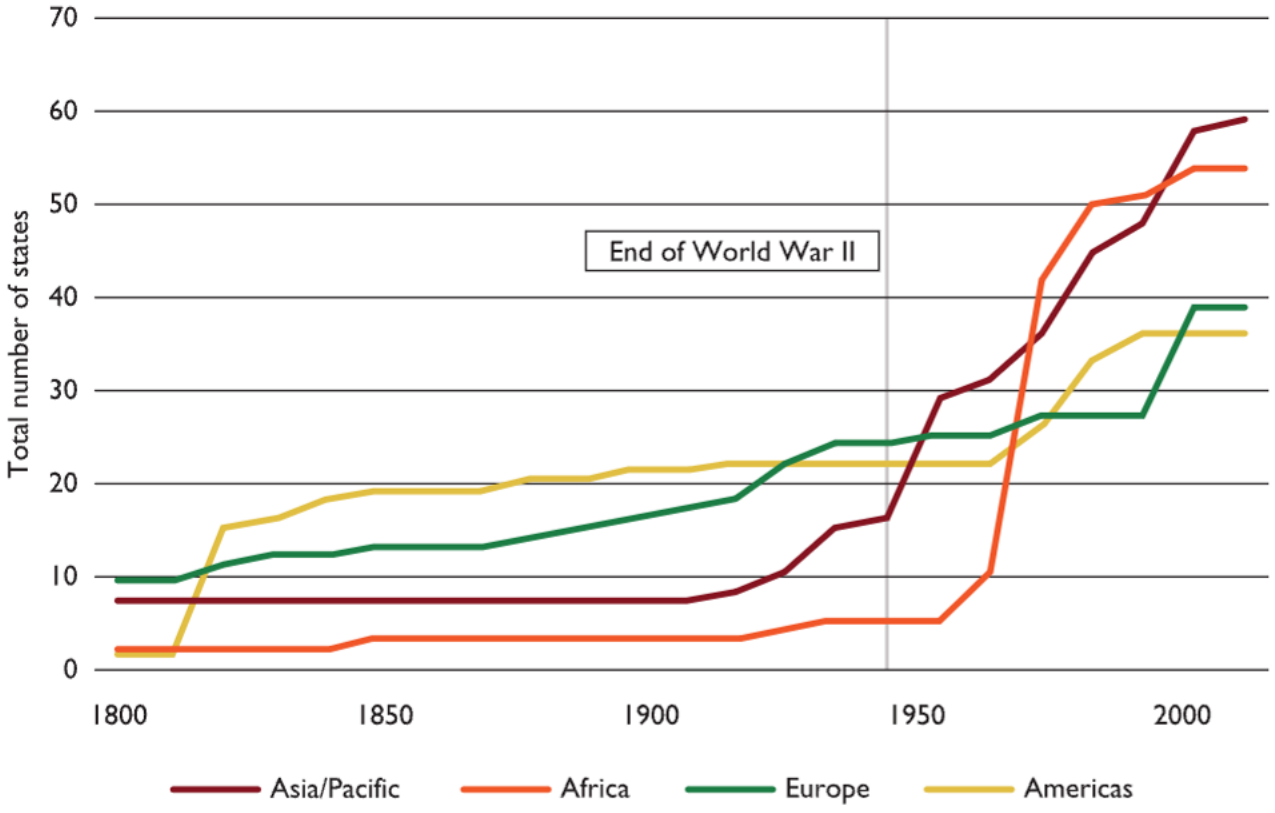


Figure 3.3 The formation of states

Source: Based on (and extrapolated from) appendix in Crawford (2007).

The most recent wave of state formation came in the final decade of the twentieth century, triggered by the collapse of communism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union – in effect, a Russian empire – into 15 successor states (see Map 3.2). Their experiences have been mixed: while the Baltic states gained economic and political stability from their proximity to, and now their membership of, the European Union, the five central Asian republics – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – have not fared so well. All five have suffered from ethnic division, pre-industrial economies, corruption, and autocratic rule, and none has been able to lift itself out of the world's lowest league of authoritarian states. Such problems were reinforced by the absence in these states of pre-colonial experience as independent states.

Although we now seem to be in an era of relative quiet in terms of state formati are not more changes to come. Many of the states that were created by European colonialism still struggle to stay together, in some cases fighting bitter civil wars that have resulted in partition: Eritrea became independent from Ethiopia in 1993, for example, and the southern region of Sudan became independent in 2012 as South Sudan, the world's newest state. Even in Europe, where it might be reasonable to think that internal tensions had been resolved decades ago by war, there are still active secessionist movements (see *Exploring Problems 3*, and the discussion later in this chapter on nationalism).

Map 3.2 The Soviet successor states

BEHROUZ MEHRI / Staff

The United Nations headquarters in New York. The field of comparative politics has widened dramatically in recent decades with the increase in the number of sovereign states.

THE DIVERSITY OF STATES

All states may have governments, populations, territories, sovereignty, and legitimacy, but history has left them looking quite different in many ways. These differences impact their place in the world, the ways in which they govern themselves, and – often – the efficiency of their systems of government. Among the key markers of their diversity are their population numbers, the different size and structure of their economies, and their contrasting levels of political authority.

Population

States are far from equal in terms of population numbers. At one end of the scale, India and China – each with populations of about 1.4 billion – are each bigger than the 160 smallest countries in the world combined. At the other end, the population of most countries in the world is less than 10 million, with one in five each falling below 1 million (Figure 3.4). In median position sits Switzerland (8.6 million) – a country usually described as 'small' but which only appears as such when viewed from the perspective of larger states. By population, the smallest state in the world is the western Pacific Island state of Tuvalu, which has just 11,200 residents.

The challenges of governing large states such as India, China, the United States, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Brazil are usually much greater than the challenges faced by their smaller neighbours. The bigger states will have more cultural, geographical, and economic diversity, making it more difficult to develop common

EXPLORING PROBLEMS 3

COME TOGETHER, FALL APART?

Numerous countries around the world have chosen to highlight unity in their national mottos. Consider the following selection:

- Bolivia: *La Unión es la Fuerza*, or 'Unity is strength'.
- Papua New Guinea: 'Unity in Diversity'.
- Indonesia: *Bhinneka Tungal Ika*, or 'Out of many, one'.
- Malaysia: *Bersekutu Bertambah Mutu*, or 'Unity is strength'.
- Serbia: *Samo sloga Srbina spasava*, or 'Only unity saves the Serbs.'
- United States: *E pluribus unum*, or 'Out of many, one'.

While the implication is that harmony among individuals or groups is to be praised and hoped for, the frequency with which unity crops up as a theme in national identity reflects the degree to which many states have struggled to actually remain united. The long history of the creation and evolution of states is peppered with civil wars, secession, forced integration, and efforts by minorities to break away from centralized control. Even today, there are secessionist, separatist, or regionalist movements in dozens of countries around the world, notably Belgium, Canada, China, India, Iraq, Spain (with its Basque and Catalan independence movements), Sri Lanka, Russia, Turkey, and the UK. There are also numerous countries that are divided by ethnicity or religion.

In some cases, the dissolution of states has been peaceful, as in the case of the 'velvet divorce' between the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993. In most other cases, though, the dissolution of states has been violent, as in the examples of the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1991–92 and the long civil wars that preceded the independence of Eritrea from Ethiopia and the independence of South Sudan from Sudan.

The long history of states being held together by force and of national groups struggling for independence raise multiple questions about why states stay together. In some cases the issue is control over resources, such as land, minerals, or oil, and in other cases it is a question of discouraging one secession so as to discourage others. Consider these questions:

- Why do the governments of states often struggle so hard to keep those states together even when their efforts cause resentment among so many of their citizens?
- Does it come down to an expression of power, or are other factors more important?
- Should governments and citizens be working to keep their countries together, or should they allow dissolution or secession whenever there are reasonable claims?

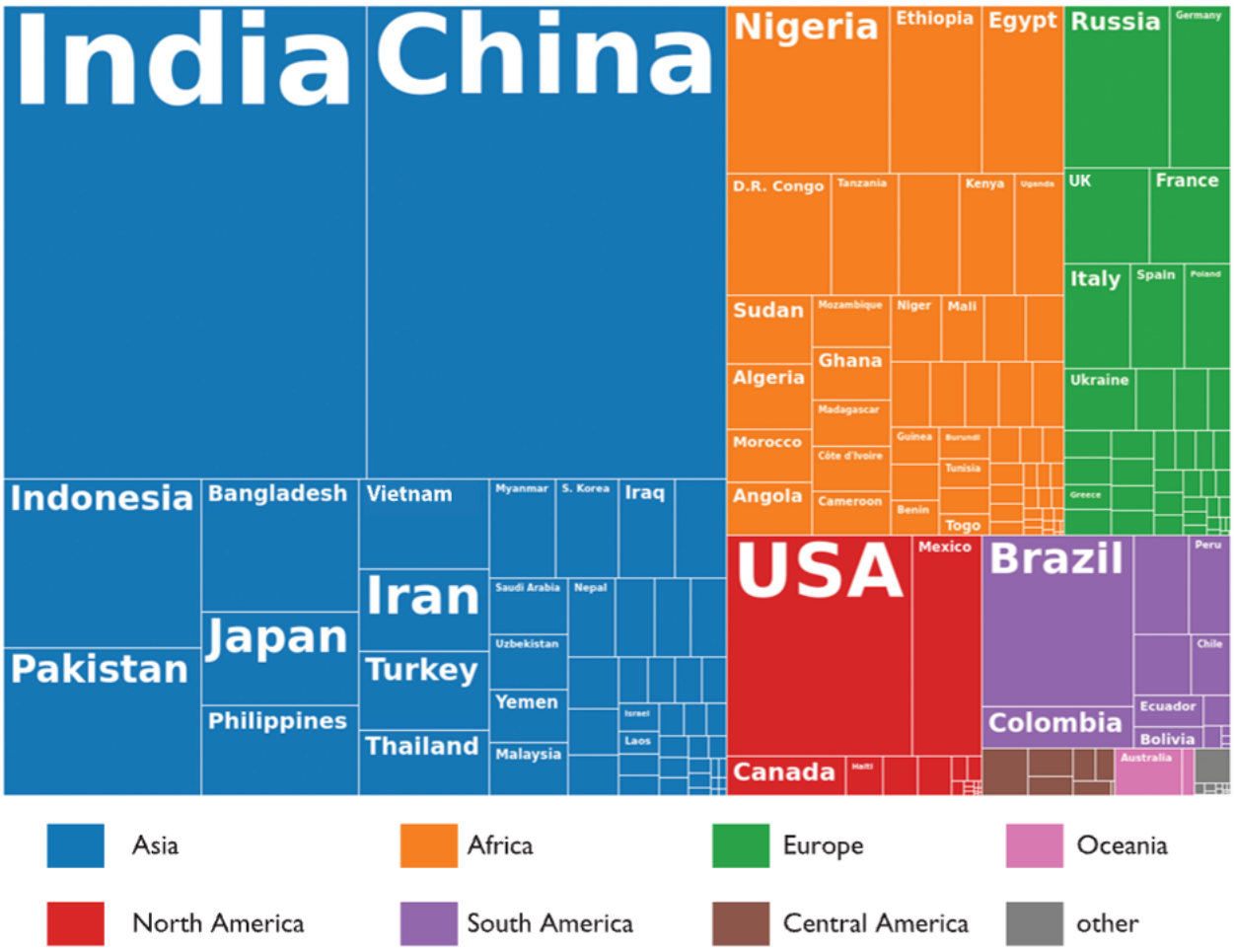


Figure 3.4 The size of states

policies or to ensure strong links between people and government. Small size, though, is not necessarily a recipe for success. While some of the smallest European states (notably Iceland and Luxembourg) have combined political stability with economic success, many others are both people- and resource-poor; Pacific Island states such as Tuvalu, Nauru, Palau, and the Marshall Islands have few people (none has more than 50,000 residents), little in the way of natural resources or economic opportunities, and poor trade and transport connections to the rest of the world. Many barely function as viable political and economic units.

Wealth

Just as they are unequal in terms of population, so states are unequal in terms of the size and potential of their economies. We can measure them in terms of their productivity, in which case the United States and China are the behemoths with GDPs, respectively, of $23 trillion and $17 trillion in 2021, while Tuvalu once again trails with a GDP of just $63 million. The differences, though, are about more than one measure, and for some of the nuances we need to look to the classification offered by the World Bank (see Table 3.1). Updated annually, this divides states (or, more accurately, economies) into

Table 3.1: States by income

Category	Gross National Income per capita	Number of states	Examples
High income	$13,206 or above	81	Australia, France, Germany, Japan, Poland, Sweden, UK, US
Upper middle income	$4,256–13,205	54	Brazil, China, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, Turkey, Venezuela
Lower middle income	$1,086–4,255	54	Egypt, Haiti, India, Iran, Nigeria, Philippines, Ukraine, Vietnam
Low income	$1,085 or below	28	Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, North Korea, Somalia, Syria

Source: World Bank (2023). Data are for 2023 fiscal year. The list includes political communities not recognized as sovereign states, such as the Cayman Islands, Gibraltar, Greenland, and Hong Kong. For the latest information, see World Bank at https://datahelpdesk.worldbank.org.

four income groups so as to provide an indicator of wealth linked to measures of well-being such as poverty and infant mortality.

The high-income category is still dominated by the developed economies of Europe, North America, Australasia, and parts of Asia. It is these which dominate the membership of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a Paris-based body whose goal is to 'shape policies that foster prosperity, equality, opportunity and well-being for all … [by] finding solutions to a range of social, economic and environmental challenges' (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2024a). While the economic and political resources of OECD states remain large, their strength was diminished by the global financial crisis of 2008–10, the resulting increase in public debt, and the problems created by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020–21. Furthermore, the weight of population lies elsewhere: the United States and Mexico are the only two OECD members in the world's ten most populous countries. Meanwhile, the World Bank's high-income category includes small, oil-rich, authoritarian regimes such as Kuwait and Qatar, confirming, again, that large size is unnecessary for large wealth.

The upper-middle-income category includes most of the fast-growing new economies, whose economic dynamism and sometimes large populations has sparked a rebalancing of world power away from the developed West. The category includes four of the BRICS countries (**B**razil, **R**ussia, **I**ndia, **C**hina, **S**outh Africa), a designation invented in 2001 by an economist at the investment firm Goldman Sachs (O'Neill, 2001). The story has not been quite so happy for Russia and Brazil of late, though; the former has been suffering from inflation, the effects of sanctions imposed following its 2014 annexation of Crimea and its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and rising wealth inequality. Brazil, meanwhile, has seen a combination of drought, a sluggish economy, corruption, rising energy costs, and high numbers of infections and deaths from Covid-19.

Lower-middle-income countries are found mainly in Africa and Asia. Although their economies are changing and growing, their levels of affluence and their global political weight has not always matched that of upper-middle-income states. India has long been something of a puzzle: its economy is the world's fifth largest, but it suffered for many years from unmet potential, and the benefits of its economic development have not reached down to the poorest of its citizens. Core problems included the large role played by the state in the economy, and the challenge of dealing with India's rapid population growth. Recent governments have modernized the economy and attracted foreign investment, which have helped encourage economic growth and reduced poverty rates, but many problems remain.

With the exceptions of Afghanistan, North Korea, Syria, and Yemen, the low-income countries are from sub-Saharan Africa. With per capita incomes of less than $1,000 per year (often substantially less), life for the majority of people in these countries remains challenging; resources and infrastructure are limited, economies are based mainly on agriculture, and several of these countries – such as those on the margins of the Sahara Desert – suffer handicaps inflicted by nature. Among many other effects, these factors create a dependence of the poor and powerless on the rich and powerful.

The world's least productive country in 2021 was Burundi, which had a per capita GDP of just $259, a number that stood in stark contrast to the per capita GDP of Luxembourg, the world's most productive country at nearly $125,000. The population of Burundi was much larger than that of Luxembourg – nearly 13 million compared to 640,000 – but while most Luxembourgers are well educated and work in high-earning services such as banking and finance, the vast majority of Burundians work in low-profit agriculture. Burundi is still struggling to recover from the effects of an ethnically based civil war that ended in 2006, and has been unable to invest in the kind of educational and health care systems needed to act as the foundation for a productive workforce and a stronger economy.

Political authority

Even if all states are equally sovereign under international law, they do not necessarily have the same levels of internal cohesion and stability. Historically, many have struggled with political, religious, and cultural divisions, which in many cases have only been resolved by war. Those divisions continue today in many states, some of which have seen the development of a steady state compromise, but others of which have failed to achieve the degree of political authority needed to guarantee stability and success.

Quasi-states: States that exist and are recognized under international law but whose governments control little of the territory under their jurisdiction.

In some cases, political authority is compromised by the failure of states to achieve complete control over their territory, or to win international legal recognition. The former are what Jackson (1990) calls **quasi-states**, which he defines as those that won independence from a former colonial power but have since lost control over much of their territory. They are recognized by the international community as having the rights and responsibilities of a state, and are probably members of the United Nations, but they barely exist as a functioning entity. Somalia is a prime example: governed during the colonial era as

Map 3.3 The contested borders of Somalia

the separate territories of Italian Somaliland and British Somaliland, the two united in 1960 as the independent state of Somalia. Efforts by the former British territory to gain independence as Somaliland were violently quashed, and the outbreak of a civil war in 1991 led to the collapse of centralized government and the emergence of several autonomous regions within the country. Although Somalia has been formally a federal republic since 2012, much of the northern part of the country has long functioned autonomously as either Somaliland or as the Puntland State of Somalia – see Map 3.3.

Others are what Pegg (1998) calls ***de facto* states**, meaning that they control territory and have their own governments, but are mainly unrecognized by the international community, and thus have no legal or *de jure* existence. While quasi-states are legitimate but ineffective, *de facto* states are illegitimate but effective. Key examples include Abkhazia, Kosovo, Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, Somaliland, Taiwan, and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Somaliland provides a strong contrast with Somalia; the latter has a seat in the United Nations and is recognized internationally even though it is ineffective, while Somaliland remains unrecognized despite the fact that it has been governing the northern one-third of Somalia in relative peace – and with a strong democratic record – since 1991.

De *facto* states: States that are not recognized under international law even though they control territory and provide governance. They exist in fact (*de facto*) rather than under law (*de jure*).

UNDERSTANDING NATIONS

In October 2023, militants from an organization named Hamas launched an attack on southern Israel from the Gaza strip, a small piece of territory populated mainly by Palestinians. More than 1,400 Israeli civilians were killed and more than 200 taken hostage. Israel responded with a massive bombardment of Gaza that took thousands of lives, including members of Hamas but also many

Anadolu / Contributor

Residents of Gaza wait with empty containers in a food line during the Israeli-Hamas war in early 2024. Palestinians are a leading example of the problems faced by a nation that lacks its own state.

more innocent civilians. The conflict was just the latest related to the struggle by Palestinians to be given their own independent state in territory that they once occupied, but in which the state of Israel was created in 1948. The so-called two state solution, in which Israeli and Palestinian states coexist as neighbours, has so far proved impossible to achieve, leaving Palestinians to live as stateless residents of two pieces of land (Gaza and the West Bank) over which they have only limited control. Of all the examples of nations living without states, that of the Palestinians has proved the most troubling and the most intractable.

The dilemma of the Palestinians reminds us that no discussion of states can be complete without understanding the related, overlapping, and more elusive idea of the **nation**. If a state is a legal and political concept, then a nation is a cultural and historical concept (and, strictly speaking, it is wrong to call a state a nation, as many people do). Where people belong to states through the legal status of citizenship, people are members of a national group because they identify with other members through a shared language and history, and through the less easily measured ideas of culture and national mythology. Where states exist under law, nations are considered by Anderson (2013) to be 'imagined communities' and are often defined as any group that upholds a claim to be regarded as a nation.

Nation: A cultural and historical concept describing a group of people who identify with one another on the basis of a shared history, culture, language, or myths.

This all sounds a little vague, but in two ways we can be more precise. First, nations are peoples with homelands. As Eley and Suny (1996) once put it, a nation – like a state – implies 'a claim on a particular piece of real estate'. Here, the origin of the word *nation*, deriving from a Latin term meaning 'place of birth', is relevant, and the link between nation and place is critical. Second, when a group claims to be a nation, it usually claims a right to **self-determination** within its homeland. In other words, it seeks sovereignty over its land, exploiting

Self-determination: The ability to act without external compulsion. The right of national self-determination is the right of a people to possess its own government.

or inventing a shared culture to justify its claim. A social group becomes a nation by achieving or seeking control over its own destiny, whether through independence or devolution. For example, the campaign for a Palestinian state since 1948 has strengthened what was previously a more amorphous Palestinian national identity. In turn, a national identity unites people who may not know each other but who, nonetheless, find themselves living together under common rulers and markets. As Langman (2006) puts it, national identity provides a rationalization for participation in war, encouraging people 'to die for the sake of strangers'.

Nations, unlike states, do not necessarily have tidy geographical boundaries, and the two ideas do not always neatly coincide. At one end of the spectrum is the archetypal **nation-state**, which – taken literally – contains only the people belonging to a single nation (see Wimmer, 2013). In the nineteenth century, the English political philosopher John Stuart Mill (1861) argued that 'where the sentiment of nationality exists in any force there is a prima facie case for uniting all the members of the nationality under the same government, and a government to themselves apart'. This has rarely happened in practice, though, and we have to look hard to find states that are nationally homogenous. One of the few examples is Iceland, where most of its 372,000 residents are Icelandic. They share such a well-documented descent from within a compact island that the state's birth records provide a perfect laboratory for genetic research. Japan is another example; while its government does not keep precise figures, it is estimated that about 98 per cent of the population is ethnically Japanese. Japanese governments since 1945 have so enthusiastically promoted the idea of monoculturalism that the idea of ethnic homogeneity has become a core part of Japanese identity.

Nation-state: A state whose citizens share a common national identity.

On a different part of the spectrum, and much more commonly, we find the concept of a **multinational state**, in which multiple national groups live under a shared government. To do so efficiently and effectively is not always easy to achieve because of concerns by each group that it will be dominated by one of the others, or lose out on a fair share of national resources. Although international migration is moving many, perhaps most, states in this direction as they become more diverse, multinationalism is far from new. Britain, for example, has long been divided between English, Welsh, Scottish, and Irish nationals; Canada between English- and French-speakers; and Belgium between Dutch-, French-, and German-speakers. Multinationalism is a feature of most European states, all of which have national minorities, and most of which have been engaged in the work of the European Union (EU, see *Spotlight 3* on the EU at the end of this chapter). The EU is partly an effort – via **regional integration** – to encourage the citizens of its 27 member states to build a shared identity, in addition to their national and state identities.

Multinational state: A state consisting of multiple different national groups under a single government.

Regional integration: The process by which states build economic and political ties that result in some pooling of authority over areas of policy where they believe that cooperation is better than competition.

Less common, but also important in terms of understanding the way that some states struggle to build national unity, is the division of national groups among several states. The Kurds, for example, live in Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and several neighbouring states, and thus form a stateless nation (see Map 3.4). Iraqi Kurds have been autonomous since 1970, and control large oil reserves, while Kurds fighting in the Syrian civil war have been able to establish control since

Map 3.4 The stateless Kurds

2012 over Kurdish regions of Syria. However, the region's estimated 40–45 million Kurds have so far been unable to establish an independent Kurdistan.

Nationalism: The belief that a group of people with a common national identity (usually marked by a shared culture and history) has the right to form an independent state and to govern itself free of external intervention.

Another important effect of nations on states is found in the occurrence of **nationalism**, which has two different meanings. Originally, and classically, as it was often applied in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it meant that nations claimed the right to shape their own destiny. This was later summarized in the 1966 United Nations Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as follows: 'All peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and pursue their economic, social and cultural rights.' The second and more troubling meaning of nationalism goes beyond identity and association, and describes the more assertive actions that might be taken by nationalist leaders and groups as they promote their interests through a combination of assumed superiority and exclusion:

- For the Nazis in Germany it was about *lebensraum* (living space) and the dominance of Germans over so-called inferior races.
- For Russia and China it has been about the dominance of a single national view over those of the minorities that live in both countries.
- In the wake of Covid-19, it was a reaction to the closing of borders and the mutual accusations by the governments of China and the United States about which country was the source of the pandemic (Weiss, 2020).
- For white supremacists in multiple countries, it has been about ensuring the protection of 'our' culture from the inroads of 'others'.

- For Christian nationalists in the United States, it is a belief that their country is defined by Christianity and that steps should be taken to ensure this remains true.
- For Hindu nationalists in India, it underlies the cultural hegemony of Hindus (who make up about 80 per cent of the population) over other religions.

For Greenfield (2019), nationalism has been behind every significant development in world affairs for several centuries, ranging from the American and French revolutions of the late 1700s to the communist and fascist movements of the twentieth century, finding a new form in recent decades in several countries as populism (see Chapter 6). For Walt (2019), nationalism is the most powerful force in the world, but one that many people do not understand in spite of its critical role in shaping history for at least the past 500 years. For Mearsheimer (2018), the power of nationalism rests in part on its symbiotic relationship with the state: given increased international competition, states have strong incentives to encourage national unity so that citizens are loyal and more willing to make sacrifices for the state, helping ensure their survival as independent cultural groups, and helping create more unified economies and more productive populations.

In many countries, nationalism has been encouraged in recent decades by a reaction to globalization and immigration. Critics see them both as threats to national identity and sovereignty, and this criticism has fed into the rise of conservative parties and movements calling for a new kind of self-determination and a reaction against international cooperation. These views have often overlapped with **xenophobia** and **nativism**, as reflected in the recent and sometimes emotional debate over immigration in parts of the European Union, as well as in South Africa and the United States. Nationalist anti-immigrant sentiment was also one of the explanations behind the shock decision by British voters in a 2016 referendum to support their country leaving the European Union, and it has also been behind growing support for right-wing political parties in

Xenophobia: The fear, rejection, or exclusion of those defined as foreigners in a community or a state, closely related to racism and to **nativism**, or the view that the interests of natives should be favoured over those of immigrants.

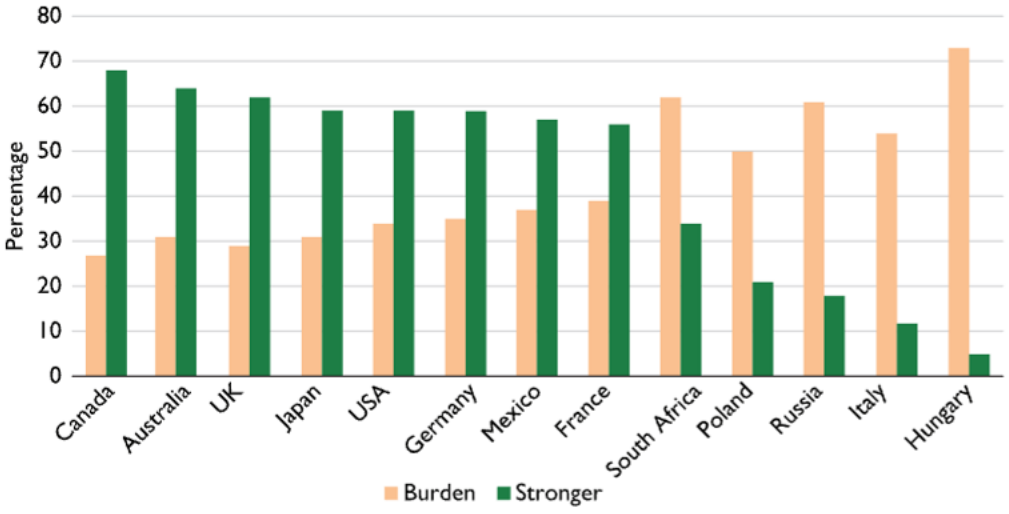


Figure 3.5 Comparing views about immigration

Source: Based on Pew Research Center (2018). Percentage choosing between 'Immigrants today are a burden on our country because they take our jobs and social benefits' and 'Immigrants today make our country stronger because of their work and talents'.

Hungary, the Netherlands, Sweden, and other European countries (see Figure 4.3). Nationalism was also at the heart of the electoral victories of Narendra Modi in India in 2014 and 2019, and of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines and Donald Trump in the United States in 2016. In most countries, though – see Figure 3.5 for examples – anti-immigrant sentiment is not as strong as the view that immigrants bring strengths and benefits.

THE FUTURE OF THE STATE

States are far from static, and the debate about where they are headed has intensified in the wake of the contrasting pressures of globalization and nationalism. One school of thought argues that they are as strong as ever. They still have a monopoly over the control and use of militaries, they are still the key actors in economic production and international trade, their citizens still identify mainly with their home states and are subject to the authority and rules of the state, and the ability of states to respond to new challenges has grown thanks to technological innovation. For example, in their efforts to address international terrorism, many states have accumulated new powers to impinge upon personal privacy and to limit the movement and the choices of those who live and travel within their borders. The response to Covid-19 – with its many lockdowns and its ruling on vaccines – was another indication of the power of states to make and impose decisions.

Meanwhile, changes in technology – such as monitoring by closed-circuit television, and of cell phone and internet use, and via artificial intelligence – have offered new tools for the state to track its population, including ordinary citizens as well as terrorists and terrorist suspects. This growth of what is sometimes called the **security state** has sparked a reaction as citizens have expressed concerns about surveillance, threats to civil liberties, and the limited accountability of intelligence services. These broader powers were emphasized by the way in which states were able to close borders and impose lockdowns on their citizens during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Security state: A state that makes efforts to follow the activities of its citizens through such means as closed-circuit television and the monitoring of phone calls and internet use.

Another school of thought argues that the grip of states is weakening, thanks to the many challenges they have faced in achieving internal unity and stability. After decades during which the number of states had grown, and the power of states also seemed to have grown, it became common in the 1990s and early 2000s to see speculation that states were in trouble (see, for example, Ohmae, 2005). Not only had there been a steady expansion of interstate cooperation on a wide range of issues since the end of World War II, diluting the autonomy of states, but globalization appeared to be accelerating; there was increased economic interdependence, changes in technology and communications, the growth of international markets, the spread of a global culture, and the harmonization of public policies in the face of shared or common problems. At the same time, people were becoming more mobile: complex new patterns of migration were driven by a combination of economic need and personal choice, and mass tourism was breaking down many of the psychological barriers among states. As if all of this was not enough, the state was coming under increased criticism for its many failures; see Table 3.2 for some of those criticisms.

Table 3.2: Ten criticisms of the state

1. Imposing unnecessary divisions on human society.
2. Having a history of going to war with each other.
3. Limiting the free movement of people and capital.
4. Imposing limits on trade that handicap innovation and efficiency.
5. Pursuing state interests at the expense of human interests.
6. Allowing exclusion to dominate over inclusion.
7. Promoting narrow identities at the expense of broader identities.
8. Having a poor record of working with other states to address shared problems such as terrorism, transboundary pollution, illegal immigration, and the spread of disease.
9. Being often unable to meet the demands of their residents for security, justice, prosperity, and human rights.
10. Failing to manage their economies and national resources to the benefit of all their residents.

If globalization and new levels of interstate cooperation are broad signs that states are becoming weaker, a more focused and worrying indication that some states are in trouble is found in the phenomenon of the failed, fragile, or **failing state** (there is no agreement on the best term). These are states that have so many internal problems that they have stopped functioning effectively, and have the kinds of features that Robert Rotberg (2004) ascribes to what he terms a weak state:

Failing state: A state with weak governing institutions, often deep internal divisions, and where the basic needs of people are no longer met. Examples include Eritrea, Haiti, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen.

- Authorities have difficulty keeping control and usually face insurgencies or armed revolts, which often impact large swathes of national territory, and in the worst cases become full-blown civil wars. Driven by ethnic or other inter-communal hostility, 'regimes prey on their own constituents', with rulers oppressing, extorting, and harassing their people.
- Criminal violence worsens as state authority weakens. Gangs take over the streets, arms and drug trafficking spread, the police forces lose control, and people turn to warlords and other strong figures for protection. The warlords then become the suppliers of political goods in place of the official authorities (see Chapter 11). Few countries have fallen into lawlessness quite as dramatically as Haiti, where death squads known as the Tonton Macoute were encouraged for decades by the dictators 'Pap Doc' Duvalier and his son 'Baby Doc' Duvalier through much of the 1960s and 1970s. A variation on this idea was reborn following the assassination in July 2021 of President Jovenel Moise, and another devastating earthquake a month later. The collapse of the government and the economy was accompanied by the spread of gang warfare on the streets of the capital, Port-au-Prince.
- Political institutions are ineffective, with all but the executive losing control or ceasing to function altogether, the court system weakening, the bureaucracy losing its sense of professional responsibility, democratic debate all but disappearing, and the military remaining as the only institution with any integrity.

Table 3.3: The Fragile States Index

Country	Score	Country	Score	Country	Score
Norway	14.5	USA	45.3	Turkey	81.2
Sweden	20.6	China	65.1	Egypt	81.6
Australia	22.0	Mexico	69.8	Iran	85.4
Germany	24.6	South Africa	72.0	North Korea	87.0
France	28.8	India	74.1	Venezuela	90.5
Japan	30.5	Brazil	74.5	Nigeria	98
UK	41.9	Russia	80.7	Somalia	111.9

Source: Fund for Peace (2023). The higher the score, the more fragile the state. For the latest information, see Fund for Peace at https://fragilestatesindex.org.

Estimates of the number of failing or failed states in the world vary – depending on how they are defined – from about 20 to about 60. One useful point of reference is the Fragile States Index produced annually by the Fund for Peace, a Washington DC-based research body which uses a series of political, economic, and social measures to rate almost every country in the world. In its 2023 index (see Table 3.3) it described most democracies as being either sustainable or stable (Norway had the best score on the index), it gave a 'warning' status to China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, and Russia, and an 'alert' status to several dozen mainly African and Middle Eastern states, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Myanmar, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, with Somalia scoring as the most fragile state (see also discussion in Collier, 2007).

As to the question of why states fail (or struggle), opinion differs. Diamond (2011) looks at historical examples to conclude that success is often a matter of geography and good luck, and the blame for failure often lies with environmental change. Meanwhile, Acemoglu and Robinson (2013) lay the blame at the door of institutions. It is not a matter of geography, climate, or culture, they argue, but because leaders pursue the wrong kinds of policies. States collapse, they suggest,

> because they are ruled by what we call 'extractive' economic institutions, which destroy incentives, discourage innovation, and sap the talent of their citizens by creating a tilted playing field and robbing them of opportunities. These institutions are … there for the benefit of elites who gain much from the extraction – whether in the form of valuable minerals, forced labour, or protected monopolies – at the expense of society.

Wherever the truth lies about their future, states will continue to be needed to provide government and security, to manage economies, to prepare their citizens with the education and skills needed to address global change, and to provide the driving force needed to respond to shared global problems such as disease and environmental degradation. Rather than declining, states may instead be undergoing a process of change as developments in trade, international law, and modernization have changed the nature of their power, the relationships among them, and the relationship between states and citizens. (For a survey of the debate, see Sørensen, 2004, and Hay et al., 2006.)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How does the state make itself felt in our lives?
- How are states different from governments?
- What does it mean to be a citizen of a state?
- How does national identity make itself felt in our lives?
- How do the interests of the state differ from those of a nation?
- Is the reach of the state expanding, contracting, staying about the same, or simply being reformed?

KEY CONCEPTS

- Citizenship
- *De facto* states
- Failing state
- Interpretivism
- Legitimacy
- Multinational state
- Nation
- Nation-state
- Nationalism
- Nativism
- Natural rights
- Quasi-states
- Regional integration
- Security state
- Self-determination
- Sovereignty
- State
- Westphalian system
- Xenophobia

FURTHER READING

Crawford, James (2007) *The Creation of States in International Law*, 2nd edn (Oxford University Press). A legal perspective on the definition, origins, powers, and problems of states.

Greenfield, Liah (2019) *Nationalism: A Short History* (Brookings Institution Press). A short review of the origins, character, and future of nationalism.

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Jessop, Bob (2015) *The State: Past, Present, Future* (Polity Press). A survey of the origins, qualities, and future prospects of the state.

Kochenov, Dimitry (2019) *Citizenship* (MIT Press). A survey of the meaning of citizenship, including chapters on the rights and duties of citizens.

Ritzer, George, and Paul Dean (2019) *Globalization: The Essentials*, 2nd edn (Wiley Blackwell). A survey text on globalization, defining the concept and explaining how it has impacted – and been impacted by – economics, politics, and culture.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Visit **bloomsbury.pub/comparative-government-and-politics-13e** to access additional materials to support teaching and learning.

SPOTLIGHT 3
EUROPEAN UNION

PROFILE

In a world of states, the European Union is an anomaly. It began in the 1950s as an effort to build a single market among its six founding members in the interests of promoting peace and economic reconstruction after the war. It has since expanded its membership (to 27) and its reach, but opinion on its political personality is much debated. It has common policies in several areas, and it encourages cooperation among its member states on a wide variety of issues; most of those members have also adopted a single currency, the euro. It has treaties but no constitution, and administrative institutions that fall short of being a government of the EU. It is not a federal United States of Europe and, while some support moves in that direction, there is also resistance to deeper European integration, particularly among nationalists and those opposed to immigration.

Form of government	Debatable. More than an intergovernmental organization, but less than a federal European superstate.
Executive	Shared between a European Council that is the meeting place of the heads of government of the member states, and a powerful European Commission that is a cross between an executive and a bureaucracy.
Legislature	A single-chamber European Parliament whose members are elected directly by all eligible voters of the EU member states. Its standing has increased substantially since the 1970s, though its scope still does not cover all areas of EU responsibility. The Council of Ministers, consisting of government ministers from the member states, is in many ways a second legislative chamber.
Judiciary	The European Court of Justice, composed of one judge from each member state, has developed the EU's strong legal foundations, supporting the drive for European integration.
Electoral system	Members of the European Parliament are elected for renewable five-year terms using proportional representation, with member states treated as a single constituency, or divided into a number of separate constituencies.
Parties	Multi-party. National parties mainly contest European Parliament elections running in what are – effectively – 27 separate national elections.
Population	447 million
Gross Domestic Product	$16,746 billion
Per capita GDP	$37,432
Democracy Index rating	Not rated, but about one-third of its member states are full democracies while the rest (mainly in Eastern Europe) are flawed.
Freedom House rating	Not rated, but all but state members except Hungary rated as Free.
Corruption score	Not rated, but member states score between 37 (Albania) and 90 (Denmark) out of 100.
Human Development Index rating	Not rated, but all member states rank Very High.

CASE STUDY: STATES AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

One of the many challenges to the modern state has been the phenomenon of regional integration, by which two or more states build ties of cooperation that go beyond those found in standard international organizations: they work to reduce trade barriers, create joint administrative institutions, and develop common rules on shared interests while remaining politically sovereign. The most advanced such example is the European Union, which has existed in one form or another since 1952 and now includes more than two dozen member states (see McCormick, 2021, for more details). Other examples – less ambitious in their goals – include the African Union (55 members), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN, ten members), and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC, 30 members).

TOBIAS SCHWARZ / Contributor

An activist holds up a placard that reads 'Our Europe' at the launch of a campaign by Germany's governing Christian Democratic party ahead of recent elections to the European Parliament.

The EU's main institutions look in some ways like a European government, but are actually no more than a system of shared governance. They oversee the making of common policies and laws in areas where the EU members have agreed to work together, including trade, competition, agriculture, and the environment. The result has been a reduction in the independent powers of the member states, and the development of a European identity that co-exists with the national identities of the member states. This is not a federal United States of Europe, and there is no European citizenship that replaces that of the member states, but the authority and reach of the EU have gone beyond those of any other regional body.

The expanding capacity of the EU has not been universally welcomed, and resistance to European integration has grown since the early 1990s as its focus has moved from an economic foundation towards political union. This has led to charges that the EU is an elitist construct that threatens the rights of its member states. Such thinking contributed to the Brexit decision: the 2016 vote in which a majority of British voters opted to leave the EU. In spite of the emerging difficulties with the European model, the idea of regional integration resonates in most other parts of the world, but with a greater focus on economic rather than political objectives.

Further reading

Bulmer, Simon, Owen Parker, Ian Bache, Stephen George, and Charlotte Burns (2020) *Politics in the European Union*, 5th edn (Oxford University Press).

Hix, Simon, and Bjørn Høyland (2022) *The Political System of the European Union*, 4th edn (Bloomsbury).

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4

Democratic rule

CONTENTS

- Understanding democratic rule
- Democratic regime types
- Origins and evolution
- Forms of democratic rule
- Democracies and rights
- The future of democratic rule

PREVIEW

Democracy is both one of the easiest and one of the most difficult concepts to understand. It would seem to be easy because democracies are abundant and familiar, and most of the readers of this book will probably live in one, while others will live in countries that aspire to become democracies. Democracy is also one of the most closely studied of all political concepts, the ease of that study made stronger by the openness of democracies and the availability of information regarding how they work. At the same time, our understanding of democracy is made more difficult by the sheer variety of interpretations of what democracy means in practice, and by the many claims that are made for democracy that do not stand up to closer examination.

This chapter begins with a review of the features of democracy and of its different types, focusing on the categories of full and flawed democracy used in the Democracy Index. It then looks at the evolution of democratic ideas, assessing the waves of democracy described by Samuel Huntington. The chapter then looks at the four main forms of democracy, beginning with the Athenian idea of direct democracy, before assessing and comparing the features of representative, liberal, and illiberal democracy. The chapter then reviews the relationship between rights and democracy, before ending with an assessment of the current state and future prospects for democracy. After several decades during which democracy has expanded and authoritarianism has contracted, there have been some worrying recent reversals.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Democracy is often regarded as the ideal form of government, and yet there is still no universally agreed definition of democracy, and there are many adjectives used to condition the use of the term.
- About half the states in the world are classified by Freedom House as Free, and by the Democracy Index as either full or flawed democracies.
- The expansion of democracy occurred in several distinct waves, but troubling questions are now being asked about a democratic reversal.
- Athenian direct democracy offers a standard of self-rule against which today's representative (indirect) democracies are often judged.
- Representative democracy limits the people to electing a government, while liberal democracy places limits on government, and illiberal democracy suggests that democracy can be weakened from within.
- Democracy is threatened by a combination of internal weaknesses and the pressures from more confident authoritarian regimes such as China and Russia.

UNDERSTANDING DEMOCRATIC RULE

Few countries have come closer than Norway to achieving the modern ideal of **democracy**. This Nordic state of just under 5.5 million people typically comes at the top of most comparative political, economic, and social ranking systems. It placed first, for example, on the 2022 Democracy Index with a score of 9.81 (out of 10), and perfect scores of 10 on its electoral process, political participation, and political culture. It also scored a perfect 100 on the 2023 *Freedom in the World* ranking (along with neighbouring Sweden and Finland). It is 'one of the most robust democracies in the world', concluded Freedom House (2024), with elections that are free and fair, a regular rotation of power between political parties, and respect for civil liberties.

Democracy: A political regime in which government is based on a fair and open mandate from all qualified citizens of a community.

As to why Norwegian democracy is so strong, there are several possible answers:

- Its model of democracy works well: Norway is stable and egalitarian, women and minority groups enjoy full political rights and electoral opportunities, corruption is rare, freedom of the press and assembly are respected, and the government – notes Freedom House – is able to develop and implement policy 'without undue influence from actors who are not democratically accountable'.
- Norway enjoys considerable oil wealth and has managed its resources well. Decades of democratic socialism (a means of managing the economy democratically and ensuring fair distribution of opportunity) have given workers strong protection and provided Norwegians with generous health care, free education, and high wages. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Norway also routinely ranks high on the Human Development Index and on the annual World Happiness Report (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2023).

Despite the lessons of cases such as Norway, and despite the depth with which democracy has been studied, its features are not easy to tie down: there is no fixed model of a democratic regime, and it is found in different forms in different places, often using different institutions and structures. It is also relatively new: as we will see in the next chapter, authoritarianism has been more usual throughout human history, and is still widespread today. To complicate matters further, democracy is far from a simple matter of 'ordinary people governing themselves', as Matsusuka (2020) puts it. Its complexity is reflected in the idea of 'democracy with adjectives', referring to the many terms used to describe democratic regimes, including *liberal*, *representative*, *electoral*, *illiberal*, and *consolidated*, which will be explored in this chapter.

A valuable starting point for any discussion about democracy is the work done by the American political scientist Robert Dahl (1915–2014). He pointed out that the meaning of democracy had evolved over thousands of years, producing 'a jumble of theory and practices; that [were] often deeply inconsistent' (Dahl, 1989). The core principle of democracy is self-rule, an idea reflected in the Greek origins of the term: *demokratia,* meaning rule *(kratos)* by the people *(demos)*. However, Dahl contended, even the simple idea of 'rule by the people' has raised many questions, beginning with how best to understand 'the people'

Jon Hicks

Residents of the town of Bergen in western Norway enjoy some summer sunshine. Norway routinely ranks at the top of most comparative political, economic and social leagues.

and what it meant for them to 'rule'. There was no such thing, he continued, as a perfect democracy, which he defined as a political regime in which all citizens had an equal role, with access to identical information about the choices before them. The reality, he argued, was a **polyarchy**. This is an arrangement that is neither wholly a democracy nor a dictatorship, but is instead a democracy with political limits: control over policy is vested in elected officials, those officials are elected in relatively free and fair elections, almost all adults have the right to vote and to run for public office, and they also have the right to freedom of expression and access to alternative sources of information.

Polyarchy: Rule by many (rather than rule by all), suggesting that not everyone has an equal role to play in what we normally think of as a democracy.

The purest form of self-rule is direct democracy, a system in which all qualified citizens participate in shaping the collective decisions of a community in an atmosphere of equality and deliberation; see the discussion later in this chapter. This is rarely used, though, except at the local level in decentralized systems of government. In practice, democracy at the national level is representative, meaning that citizens agree to cede governing powers to elected officials, based on two key principles: majority rule with minority rights, and the **rule of law** (see also Chapter 7). However, this arrangement immediately creates a barrier between rulers and ruled, which is why many democratic regimes continue to be plagued by elitism, inequality, and restrictions on the rights of individuals and groups.

Rule of law: An arrangement under which societies are governed using clear, stable, and just laws to which all residents are equally subject regardless of their status.

Figure 4.1 summarizes the kinds of features we would hope to see in a democracy, ranging from stable and accountable political institutions to the protection of individual rights and a protected political opposition. As Dahl suggests, though, even the most successful democracies have had a mixed record in achieving these ideals. For example, the Democracy Index tells us that while

Feature	*Qualities*
Power	Decentralized, divided, balanced, and limited.
Institutions	Relatively well-defined, predictable, stable, and accountable.
Participation	A variety of institutionalized forms of political participation, including multiple political parties and interest groups with different platforms.
Rights	Limits on the powers of government, and protection of individual rights and freedoms under the law, sustained by an independent judiciary.
Elections	Representative system of government based on regular, fair, and competitive elections.
Opposition	An active, effective, and protected political opposition.
Media	Diverse and independent, subject to few political controls and free to share a wide variety of opinions.

Figure 4.1 Features of democratic rule

Norway has done well with its electoral process and political participation, it has done less well with protecting civil liberties. New Zealand, meanwhile, has a strong record on elections and political participation, but has fared less well in defining its political culture. Most worryingly, the Democracy Index suggests that democracy is under threat in several states that were once leaders of the democratic world (such as the United States, Britain, and France) or were on the road to democracy (such as Hungary and Poland).

At the same time, it is important to look beyond the countries most often associated with the idea of democracy, such as the Western European states that were the birthplace of the philosophies that provided most of the foundations of modern democratic thinking. Consider, by way of contrast, two states from different parts of the world that are also democracies. The first of these is Uruguay, which has left behind economic crisis and military government to become a stable democratic welfare state with the highest per capita income in Latin America, ranking high on the league tables of media freedom, income equality, human development, and social tolerance. In central Asia, meanwhile, Mongolia shook off nearly 70 years of Soviet influence in 1990, and has since exploited its mineral wealth to become a fast-growing economy with enviable stability. Although still a flawed democracy, it has been able to resist the political gravitational pull of its two authoritarian neighbours, China and Russia.

In summary, there are no absolutes when it comes to understanding democracy. Instead, there is a sliding scale that takes us from the relative rarity of states whose governments are stable, transparent, responsive, and based on strong constitutional guarantees, to states whose models of democracy are limited in some fashion. Elections might not exactly reflect the preferences of voters, access to government might be unequal, levels of public participation might be mixed, and rights might be unequally protected. Along the way, the lines of demarcation between the different types are not always clear.

DEMOCRATIC REGIME TYPES

The sliding scale of democracy is reflected in the two indices used in this book to distinguish between different political regimes (see Table 4.1). For its part, Freedom House uses 25 different indicators, ranging from the strength of the electoral system to protection of civil liberties. It then assigns scores between 0 and 10, making a distinction between countries that are Free (covered in this chapter) and Partly Free or Not Free (covered in Chapter 5). Meanwhile, the Democracy Index distinguishes between full and flawed democracies (see Map 4.1), and since this rating is used so extensively in this book, we need to explore the meanings of that distinction in more depth.

Full democracy: A political regime with a strong record on democracy, as reflected in the openness and efficiency of government and the protection of rights.

Full democracies

When the Democracy Index refers to full democracies, it means regimes containing the strongest of all the features that we associate with democracy: respect for political freedoms and civil liberties, a political culture conducive to the functioning of democracy, efficient government, independent and diverse media, an effective system of checks and balances, and an independent judiciary. About two dozen states have these qualities, including several European countries along with Australia, Canada, Costa Rica, Japan, Mauritius, New Zealand, South Korea, and Uruguay. The five Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) are prominent in the group, holding all but one of the six highest rankings in the 2023 index. Notable absentees in 2023 were the United States and Italy, both of which have experienced problems with the quality of their democratic regimes in recent years.

Reflecting the ongoing debate about the nature of democracy, two other terms are often used to describe the most democratic states:

- A *consolidated democracy* is described by Linz and Stepan (1996a) as one in which the transition to democracy has been completed (reflected, for example, in the holding of free and contested elections in which there is broadly inclusive voter eligibility), citizen rights are protected by the rule of law, and the leaders govern democratically (meaning with the bounds of the rule of law). Given recent reversals in several countries with strong democratic credentials, though, we have to question the implication that democracy involves an end-state that cannot be reversed.
- Meanwhile, an *electoral democracy* is a system in which voters choose their leaders and hold them accountable for their policies and actions while in office. This is a relatively narrow definition of the idea of democracy, though, and many scholars (see Rothstein, 2008, for example) challenge the idea that the legitimacy of governments is guaranteed by the 'input' side of the democratic process; as we will see in Chapter 14, there are many problems with elections.

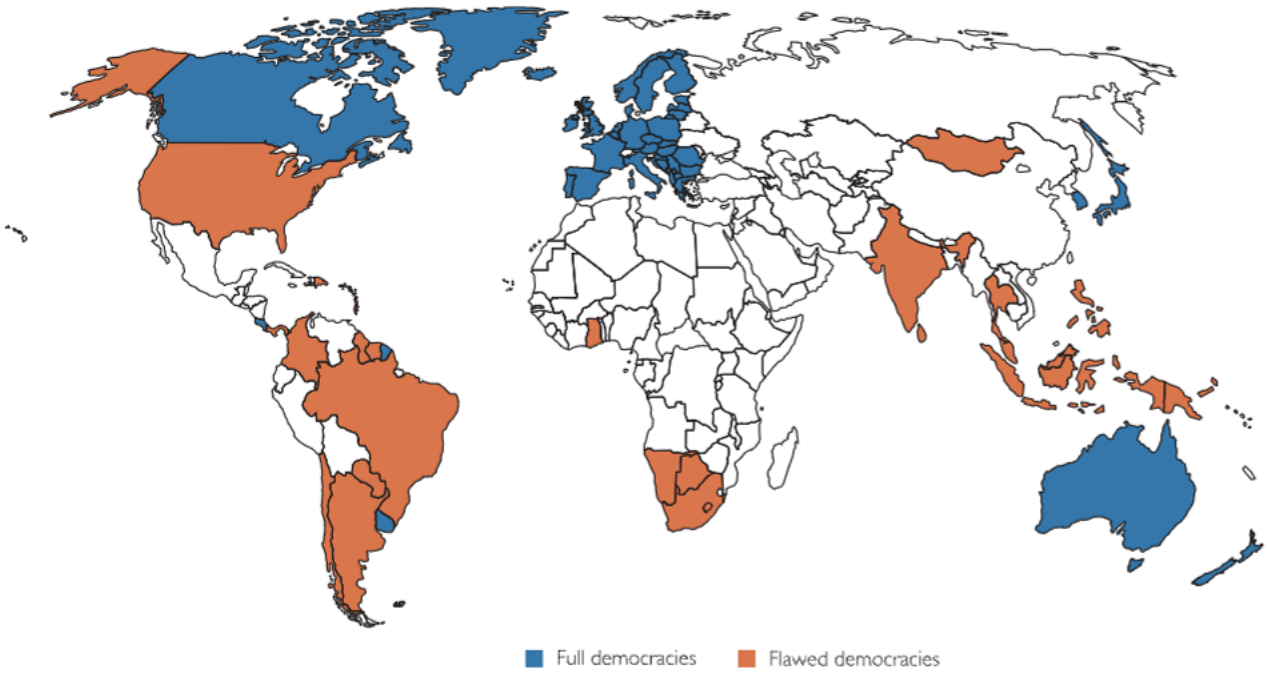
Full democracies are far from perfect, and there are many limits to the quality of representation in government, to the transparency of government, and to the equality of citizens. It is telling that none of the countries ranked in the

Table 4.1: Democratic regime types

Typology	Types and features	
Freedom in the World	Free	
	States with strong electoral processes, political participation, functioning of government, and civil liberties, although Partly Free states are weaker on all counts.	
Number in 2024	83	
Democracy Index	Full democracies	Flawed democracies
	States with the strongest democratic features, including strong and independent institutions, and respect for individual rights. Scores of 8 and above out of 10.	Democracies with handicaps, including weaker institutions and problems in governance. Scores of 6 to 7.99 out of 10.
Number in 2023	24	50

Sources: Freedom House (2024) and Economist Intelligence Unit (2024). For the latest information, see Freedom House at https://freedomhouse.org and Economist Intelligence Unit at https://www.eiu.com.

Map 4.1 Full and flawed democracies



Source: Based on Economist Intelligence Unit (2024).

Democracy Index have a score of 10/10 (although some come close), and that they also ranked as variable in terms of their electoral processes, the functioning of their governments, and the protection of civil liberties, for example. The kinds of challenges faced by efforts to improve the performance of democracy are discussed in *Exploring Problems 4*.

EXPLORING PROBLEMS 4

HOW CAN WE IMPROVE THE PERFORMANCE OF DEMOCRACY?

The British political leader Winston Churchill once famously argued that democracy was the worst form of government, except for all the others. He was acknowledging that while most of us would prefer to live in a democracy, and that democracy is considered the gold standard of government and politics, making it work is not easy. We often hear claims that a given country is a democracy – even, sometimes, a 'beacon' of democracy – and elected leaders will often proclaim after an election that 'the people have spoken', or that they have been given a 'mandate' from the people. Such claims, though, rarely stand up to close examination:

- Elected officials are often influenced by special interests, big business, or the voices of those with the means to make themselves heard most loudly.
- States have failed – as we will see in Chapter 14 – to develop electoral systems in which all votes are equally counted and represented.
- Questions are raised about varying and often declining rates of voter turnout, including differences by age, gender, education, race, income, and other factors.
- Elections can be manipulated in many ways, including complex or inconvenient registration procedures, the intimidation of voters, the poor organization of polling stations, and the miscounting of ballots.
- Political parties and candidates are not given the same amount of attention by the media, and money often skews the attention paid to competing sets of policy choices.
- The media, as we will see in Chapter 12, are often controlled by corporate or political interests, and social media have become closely tied with problems of misinformation and manipulation.

How then, can we improve the performance of democracy? The answer probably depends on how much faith we have in human nature; because democracy is a human construct, it can only be as good (or as bad) as the way in which we build and apply its rules. Consider these questions:

- Which of these matters the most: the fairness of elections, the operation of political parties, the independence of courts and the media, the forms of political participation, the protection of individual rights, or something else?
- Do the answers lie in history, geography, the structure of political systems, the actions of political leaders, the culture of societies, differences in economic opportunity, or some combination of these factors?
- What does political equality mean in practice, and is it achievable?

Flawed democracies

Flawed democracy: A political regime that is mainly democratic but that has problems in the quality of governance.

When the Democracy Index refers to 'flawed' democracies, it means regimes that meet most of the conditions for being democracies but which also face significant weaknesses. These include infringements on media freedom, problems in governance, an underdeveloped political culture, and low levels of political participation. These qualities can be found in about four dozen states, concentrated mainly in Eastern Europe (including the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, but also Belgium and Italy in Western Europe), Latin America (including Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia), and Asia (including India, Malaysia, and the Philippines).

The lack of any full democracies in Eastern Europe is a reflection mainly of the heritage of Soviet control during the Cold War: for decades, these countries had the same centralized political and economic control found in the Soviet Union, and since the end of the Cold War many have struggled to build the kind of stable democratic institutions and respect for individual rights found in most of their Western European neighbours. (The tales of Hungary and Poland (see later in this chapter) have been particularly worrying.)

Elsewhere, as in Brazil, the Philippines, and India (see *Spotlight 4* on India at the end of this chapter), such influences as nationalism (see Chapter 3) and populism (see Chapter 6) have played a role in the authoritarian tinge that has come to several flawed democracies. Problems with governance, though, are also a factor, as in Italy and the United States. In Italy, flawed electoral systems have combined with party divisions and a north–south economic and social division to bring political instability that translates into frequent changes of government. In the case of the United States, the problems have stemmed from low levels of trust in institutions and political parties, political party control over elections (a process known as gerrymandering; see *Spotlight 14*), and deep political and social polarization that make it difficult to achieve the kind of agreement needed on how best to address a string of problems, ranging from poverty to institutionalized racism.

ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

When and why did democracy emerge? The answer depends on how we define the term, but in its modern form it is a relatively recent phenomenon; it could not exist, for example, as long as women were denied the vote. The first country to allow women to vote was New Zealand in 1893, and most other countries did not come on board with this idea until after World War I. Even today, deep political inequalities continue to exist in many countries that consider themselves to be democracies, including the racism and gender discrimination found in diverse societies such as the United States, France, and Britain.

Taking a broad view of democracy, and writing against the optimistic background of the end of the Cold War, the political scientist Samuel Huntington identified three waves of democratization (summarized in Figure 4.2, and see also *Using Theory 4*), each of them different in terms of their causes and effects.

Wave	Period	Examples
First	1828–1926	Argentina, Britain, France, Italy, US
Second	1943–62	Austria, India, Israel, Japan, Uruguay, West Germany
Third	1974–91	Southern and Eastern Europe, Latin America, parts of Africa

Figure 4.2 Huntington's waves of democratization

Source: Huntington (1991).

First wave

This took place between 1828 and 1926, when the earliest representative democracies emerged. During this period, nearly 30 countries established at least minimally democratic political institutions, including Argentina, Australia, Britain, Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Nordic countries, and the United States. However, some backsliding occurred as fledgling democratic regimes were overthrown by fascist, communist, or military dictatorships (for example, in Germany and Italy) during what Huntington describes as the 'first reverse wave' from 1922 to 1942.

A distinctive feature of many first-wave transitions was their slow and sequential character, and the ongoing struggles of those who fought and sometimes died to bring change. Political power, traditionally controlled by a privileged elite, was only gradually broadened as the right to vote and to run for office was extended. In Britain, for example, each step in the expansion of the vote (see Figure 4.3) came up against the fears of the property-owning classes about the supposed dangers of new rounds of reform. The biggest increases occurred with women's suffrage; after decades of struggle, British women over

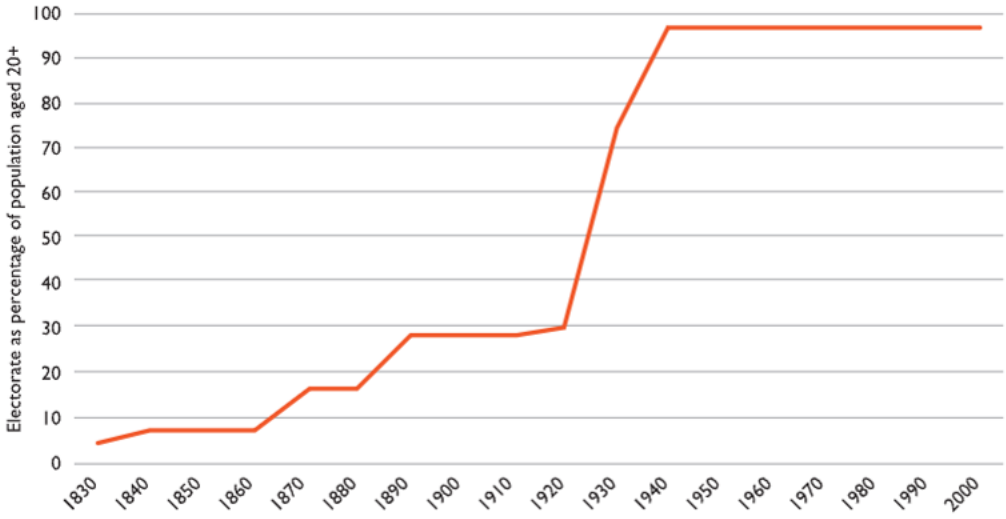


Figure 4.3 Expansion of the British electorate

Source: Adapted from Dahl (1998), fig. 2.

the age of 30 won the right to vote in 1918, and women over the age of 21 in 1928. The last major change was made in 1969, when the voting age was reduced from 21 to 18.

In the United States, and despite the claims of the revolutionary nature of its democracy, only white, male, property-owners had much say at first, while slaves – for the purposes of determining taxes and the number of representatives – were counted as equivalent only to three-fifths of the value of free persons. Black men won the right to vote in 1870, but American women were not allowed to vote on the same terms as men until 1919, and the franchise for African Americans was not fully realized until the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Even today, numerous handicaps are still placed in the way of African American voters, including the purging from voter rolls of people who have not recently voted, inconvenient times and locations for voting locations, and discriminatory voter identification rules (Newkirk, 2018). There has been a worrying trend in many states since the 2020 election to place additional limits on voter rights, allegedly in the interests of preventing electoral fraud. America's democratic transition has been a prolonged affair, is still incomplete, and in some ways is being reversed.

USING THEORY 4

DEMOCRATIZATION

Democratization: The process by which societies build the institutions and processes needed to become democracies.

One of the core questions about democracy relates to how it emerges and evolves. What are the circumstances that push an authoritarian regime towards democracy, and keep it there? (And why, conversely, has authoritarianism proved to be so resilient in countries such as China, Russia, and Syria?) If there was a clear answer to such questions, then we could easily predict the political future of every state and work to encourage authoritarian regimes to change. The problem, though, is that the process of democratization is not fully understood, and the circumstances that bring about democratic change differ with time and place.

By comparing transitions to democracy during Huntington's third wave, O'Donnell et al. (1986) were able to develop a four-step template that offered one perspective on the process (see Figure 4.4). The first step comes with the liberalization of an authoritarian regime. Much as we would like to believe in the power of public opinion, transitions are sometimes initiated by mass demonstrations against a united dictatorship. Perhaps more often, though, democracy is the outcome – intended or unintended – of recognition within part of the ruling elite that change is inevitable, or even desirable.

In the more open environment that emerges, opportunities increase to express public opposition, moving the process to the second stage of a fraught and often lengthy transition to democracy. During this time, arrangements are made for the new system of government, with efforts to overcome threats to the transition from hardliners (who may consider a military coup) and radical reformers (who may seek a full-scale revolution, rather than just a change of regime). Constitutions might need to be rewritten or amended, institutions redesigned, new elections scheduled, and the existing rulers will often look for political opportunities in the new democratic

order. The transition is most visibly complete with a high turnout election which is seen as the peak moment of democratic optimism (Morlino, 2012).

The third stage in the process – consolidation – only occurs when new institutions provide an accepted framework for political competition, or – as Przeworski (1991) puts it – 'when a particular system of institutions becomes the only game in town and when no-one can imagine acting outside the democratic institutions'. During this stage, democratic practices become habitual, but the habit of democracy takes time to form (Linz and Stepan, 1996b).

Finally, in the fourth stage, there is a deepening of democracy. Because emerging democracy is 'superficial rather than deep and the new order consolidates at a low level of "democratic quality"' (Morlino, 2012), the term *deepening* is used not so much to describe a universal stage in transitions as to acknowledge that the outcome of a transition may be a democracy which is both consolidated and superficial.

Much has changed since this model was first proposed, and the democratic backsliding we are now seeing in many countries raises new questions about the process and about the permanence of democracy. What, for example, would cause a reversal of democratization? Why would a state on a path to democracy – or that had already become a democracy – backslide? To what extent are democratic institutions able to resist efforts by authoritarian leaders to subvert the democratic process? For a contrasting view, see the discussion in Chapter 5 about autocratization.

Stage	*Qualities*
Liberalization	Initiation of the reform sequence.
Transition	Arrangements are made for the new system of government.
Consolidation	Widespread acceptance of the new system.
Deepening	Democracy evolves from the superficial to the substantial.

Figure 4.4 Stages of democratization

Second wave

Huntington's second wave of democratization began during World War II and continued until the early 1960s. Defeat in war, followed by allied occupation, helped inaugurate and promote democracy in Austria, Italy, Japan, South Korea, and West Germany, and there were trends towards democracy in several Latin American states, including Brazil, Colombia, Peru, and Venezuela. Several countries that had won independence also started off on a hopeful democratic note, including India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nigeria, and Pakistan. Again, there was a reverse wave, notably with military coups in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Greece, Indonesia, Nigeria, Peru, South Korea, and Turkey. The good news, though, was that several countries continued to develop stronger democratic credentials, including Botswana, India, Jamaica, and Uruguay.

Third wave

The third wave of democratization (1974–91) was a product of the final quarter of the twentieth century. When it began, only about 30 per cent of the world's states were democracies, but this soon began to change:

- Right-wing dictatorships in Greece, Portugal, and Spain came to an end in the 1970s.
- The military retreated from power in much of Latin America in the 1980s.
- Democracy spread to several Asian states, including the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand.
- Communism collapsed in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s.

The result was a transformation in the global political landscape, reflected in democratic volatility during the third wave: after growing between 1960 and 1980, the number of autocracies fell sharply while the number of democracies grew in tandem. The depth of the changes, though, was variable, and in many of the poorer African, Asian, and Latin American states that seemed to have become democratic, the structural conditions needed were missing. These, argues Diamond (2020), included 'high levels of per capita income and education, a substantial middle class and private sector, a reasonably capable state, cultural identification with liberal democratic values thought to be rooted in the Western enlightenment traditions, and a prior history of democratic government'. The absence of these conditions emphasized the often-shallow depth of the soil in which the seeds of democracy were sometimes planted.

Stagnation or recession?

Huntington was writing about waves of democracy in 1991, at a time of great change when there was reason to be optimistic about the future of democracy. Since then, though, many questions have been asked about the quality of democracy, and since about 2006 we have seen another Huntington-style reversal. Variously described as backsliding, erosion, or recession, it has involved a halt in the growth of the number of democracies, and a decline in the depth of democracy in many countries.

There was some brief hope in 2010–12 during the Arab Spring, when protests against authoritarian governments in North Africa and the Middle East looked to be about to bring dramatic change to the region. They brought down the regimes of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen, and saw civil unrest as far afield as Morocco and Oman. In the end, though, only Tunisia saw lasting democratic change (although even this has recently been under threat), while Libya, Syria, and Yemen were racked by civil war, and the new democratic regime of Egypt was removed in 2013 in a military coup.

Within a few years, authoritarianism had recovered, with Freedom House describing events in central Europe (including Hungary, Poland, and Ukraine) as 'a stunning democratic breakdown', noting that there were fewer democracies in the region by mid-2020 than at any time since they had begun reporting on

the state of democracy in 1995 (Freedom House, 2020). Similar trends have also been identified by Freedom House in countries in other parts of the world that were relatively new to democracy, such as Bangladesh, Brazil, the Philippines, Turkey, and Russia. Most remarkably, even democratic regimes such as Britain, France, and the United States have experienced problems, such as challenges to the checks and balances within these systems, and threats to media freedom.

In 2020, the Democracy Index (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020) was warning of a 'democratic regression' whose key indicators included the following:

- Increased emphasis on governance by elites and experts rather than popular participation.
- The growing influence of unelected and unaccountable institutions.
- Decisions of national importance being made behind closed doors by politicians, experts, or supranational bodies.
- A widening gap between national electorates, on the one hand, and political elites and parties, on the other.
- A decline in civil liberties, including media freedom and freedom of speech.

By 2023, the best that the Democracy Index could say was that regression had turned to stagnation, with only Western Europe improving its index score, while scores for most of the rest of the world had not moved much as countries emerged from Covid-19 lockdowns (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023).

What has been happening? The answers vary with time and place, but in his comparative study of democratic regression, Diamond (2020) identified two key factors: the rise of polarizing parties and political leaders, and changes in the international environment. In the case of the former, countries such as Brazil, Hungary, India, the Philippines, Poland, Turkey, and the United States had recently been led, argued Diamond, by 'classic populist politicians who rode to power by inflaming divisions and mobilizing the good, deserving "people" against corrupt elites … as well as a host of alien threats, such as international institutions, refugees and migrants, and "undeserving" minorities who really don't "belong" in the country'. Meanwhile, changes at the global level include the promotion of disinformation through social media (see Chapter 12), new levels of income inequality, economic instability, and the corrupting influences of China and Russia.

Clearly, we are living through a worrying chapter in the story of democracy, and it remains to be seen whether the changes of the last few years are temporary or permanent. It is worth remembering, though, that democracy has long been an up-and-down affair, trends have long varied from one country to another, and political scientists have failed to develop consistent explanations either for the causes of democratization, or – as we will see in Chapter 5 – for the causes of autocratization. It is also important to remember that while many populist leaders and parties have emerged (in Europe, for example), many of them have failed to win power, while the defeat of Donald Trump in 2020, and of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil in 2022, is another indicator that leaders who fail to respect democratic principles may pay the price.

FORMS OF DEMOCRATIC RULE

In Chapter 5 we will see that there are multiple and distinct forms of authoritarian rule, depending on who is in charge, how they wield their power, and where that power is focused. The same is generally true of democracies, although two of those forms – direct and representative democracy – are more conceptual than actual. In practice, democracy is mostly described using the adjective *liberal*, which describes the limits placed on government and the protection of the rights of citizens. A more recent version is *illiberal* democracy, reflecting the weakening of democracy in several countries. (See summary in Table 4.2.)

Direct democracy

Direct democracy: A system of government in which all members of the community take part in making the decisions that affect that community.

The purest form of democracy is one in which everyone in a community participates in making every decision collectively impacting that community. This was exemplified in the government of Athens between 461 and 322 BCE. Greece at the time consisted of several hundred small, independent city-communities known as *poleis* (singular: *polis*). The leader among them was Athens, where all male citizens could attend meetings of the *Ekklesia* (People's Assembly) at which they could address their peers. Athenians believed that direct popular involvement and open deliberation encouraged informed and committed citizens. However, there were flaws in the system:

- Citizenship was limited to men whose parents were citizens, so most adults – including women, slaves, and foreign residents – were excluded.
- Low turnout was a problem, even after the introduction of an attendance payment.
- The system was time-consuming, expensive, and complex.
- The system did not always lead to coherent policy, and the lack of a permanent bureaucracy eventually contributed to a period of ineffective governance.

Table 4.2: Forms of democratic rule

Form	Features	Examples
Direct	Citizens debate and reach decisions on matters of common interest.	Rare. Found mainly in the form of referendums and initiatives.
Representative	Citizens elect a legislature and, in presidential systems, a chief executive. Representatives are held to account at elections.	An incomplete and theoretical form of democratic government.
Liberal	Indirect democracy based on limited government and the constitutional protection of individual rights, including freedom of assembly, property, religion, and speech.	The form of rule found in practice in most democracies.
Illiberal	Democratically elected governments work to weaken rights and the rule of law.	Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Turkey.

Direct democracy is rare in modern political systems, limited mainly to referendums and initiatives (see Chapter 14), or to decision-making at the local community level, as in a village or a school. To go any further, some would argue, would be to risk the dangers inherent in the shallow grasp that many people have of public affairs (see Chapter 13), and this would undermine their ability to govern themselves effectively. On the other hand, respond its supporters, direct democracy creates a more participatory social environment and people will be up to – and up for – the task of self-rule. Society will have schooled them in, and trained them for, democratic politics, given that 'individuals learn to participate by participating' (Pateman, 2012).

E-democracy: A form of democratic expression through which all those with an interest in a problem or an issue can express themselves via the internet or social media.

One form of direct participation is **e-democracy** via the internet. This includes being able to vote online, launching or signing online petitions, organizing demonstrations via social media, or participating in the kind of clicktivism or digital activism discussed in Chapter 13. These are all expressions of the idea of the **public sphere** introduced by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, and was once thought to have been a useful remedy to charges that representative government had become elitist. The results of e-democracy, though, have been mixed. On the one hand, the internet provides for the instant availability of political information, allows political leaders to communicate more often and more directly with voters (helping change the way that electoral campaigns are run), and helps people engage more directly in political discussions.

Public sphere: An arena in which citizens come together to discuss shared interests and concerns, free from the influence of government, the state, or the media.

On the other hand, there are multiple problems with e-democracy:

- Many of those who express themselves via social media are either partisan or deliberately provocative, as reflected in the often-inflammatory postings of anonymous internet trolls, and the promotion of misinformation and conspiracy theories. The result is to skew the direction taken by debates, and we cannot always be sure who is behind the opinions posted.
- Much of the online political debate has come to be shaped by dominating social media sites such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter).
- The opinions expressed online tend to be those of people who post most often, and there is often a bandwagon effect reflected, for example, in the phenomenon of trending hashtags on X.
- The use of social media has raised heightened concerns about privacy, perhaps feeding into the kind of mistrust of government that has led to reduced support for conventional forms of participation (see Chapter 13).
- E-democracy relies on having access to the internet, which is a problem in poor countries, and even, sometimes, in the poorer or more isolated regions of wealthy countries.

There are also particular problems with the internet as a medium of political communication, discussed in more detail in Chapter 12.

Representative democracy

In its modern state form, democracy has transmuted from self-government to elected government, resulting in the phenomenon of **representative democracy**. To the ancient Greeks, the idea of representation would have

Representative democracy: An indirect form of government in which members of a community elect people to represent their interests and to make decisions affecting the community.

seemed absurd: how can the people be said to govern themselves if a separate class of rulers exists? The eighteenth-century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762) agreed when he warned that 'the moment a people gives itself representatives, it is no longer free. It ceases to exist.'

Yet, as large states emerged, so too did the need for a new way in which the people could shape collective decisions. One of the first authors to explore this idea was Thomas Paine, a British-born political activist who experienced both the French and the American revolutions. In his *Rights of Man* (1791/2), Paine wrote that 'By ingrafting representation upon democracy, we arrive at a system of government capable of embracing and confederating all the various interests and every extent of territory and population.' (See Chapter 8 for a related discussion about the idea of a republic, where all members of a government are either elected or are appointed by elected officials.)

Although representative government allows even large populations (such as 1.4 billion Indians and 332 million Americans) to exert some popular control over their rulers, it has plenty of critics. Prime among them was the Austrian-born political economist Joseph Schumpeter (1883–1950), who doubted the ability of ordinary voters to make informed political choices (see Chapter 13), and described elections as less a means by which voters could elect representatives to carry out their will than a device to produce a government (Schumpeter, 1943). The deciding of issues by the electorate was secondary to the election of the people who did the deciding.

On the other hand, representation offers a valuable division of labour, allowing those who want to participate to do so, and everyone else to limit their participation to monitoring government and voting at elections (Schudson, 1998). After all, how serious would our commitment to a free society be if we tried to force people to participate who would rather be doing something else? At the same time, how much truly equal representation do we find in a representative democracy? This question is explored further in Chapter 14 on elections.

Liberal democracy: A form of indirect democracy that combines representation with the constitutional protection of individual rights.

Liberal democracy

In practice, every modern democratic regime is neither a direct democracy nor a representative democracy, but is instead a **liberal democracy**, meaning that it is both representative and also liberal in the sense of being based on the idea of **limited government**. In this context, **liberalism** seeks to ensure that even a representative government respects the will of the people, who should be defended against its rulers. In particular, minorities can be protected from another of democracy's inherent dangers: tyranny by the majority. (The term *liberal* also has several other meanings; see, for example, the discussion about its application to economics in Chapter 18.)

Limited government: A belief that guarantees must be made for citizens by placing limits on the powers and reach of government.

Liberalism: A belief in the supreme value of the individual, whose natural rights exist independently of government, and who must be protected from too much government.

As noted earlier, liberal democracy is based on the principle of majority rule with minority rights, and of governance by law rather than by people. Under the principle of the rule of law, elected rulers and citizens alike are subject to constitutions that usually include a statement of individual rights. Should the government become overbearing, citizens can use domestic and international courts to uphold their rights. Of course, all democracies must allow space

for political opinion to form and to be expressed through political parties. As Beetham (2004) rightly states, 'without liberty, there can be no democracy'. In a liberal democracy, though, freedom is more than a device to secure democracy; people can best develop and express their individuality (and contribute most effectively to the common good) by taking responsibility for their own lives.

Some democracies emphasize the *liberal* in liberal democracy more than others, as reflected in a comparison of the United States and the United Kingdom. In the US, the Founding Fathers wanted to forestall a dictatorship of any kind, including tyranny by the majority. Hence the constitution set up a system of **checks and balances** by which authority is distributed among federal institutions (the presidency, Congress, and the courts), but also between the federal government and the states. This, at least, is the theory. In practice, charge critics of the US system, too much power has accumulated to political parties and a class of professional politicians (see Chapter 8), parties can manipulate electoral boundaries to suit themselves (see Chapter 14), and money plays too great a role in deciding the outcome of elections and policy debates.

Checks and balances: An arrangement in which government institutions are given powers that counter-balance one another, obliging them to work together in order to govern and make decisions.

Where US democracy diffuses power across institutions, British democracy emphasizes the sovereignty of Parliament. The government is formed by the party or coalition that has the most seats in the lower chamber of Parliament (the House of Commons), and its control over its members helps (usually) to ensure the passage of its bills into law. The institutions that limit executive power in the United States – including a codified constitution, a separation of powers, and federalism – are absent in Britain. There are signs, though, that Britain is moving in a more liberal direction: it has had a Supreme Court since 2009, its judiciary has become more active and independent, and there has been a popular reaction against professional politicians. British governments have more control than their American counterparts, although the situation in both countries is fluid.

Illiberal democracy

In 1995, Bell et al. (1995) argued that Pacific Asia was not experiencing the liberal democratic trend coming in the wake of the end of the Cold War. Instead, they wrote of the emergence of a new kind of **illiberal democracy** growing out of the hierarchical values and efforts to manage change found in several countries in the region. Two years later, the US-based political commentator Fareed Zakaria wrote an article in which he expounded on the idea from a wider perspective (Zakaria, 1997). While pointing out that democracy had long been understood to mean *liberal* democracy, including not just free and fair elections but also the rule of law and the protection of basic liberties, he argued that the two strands were beginning to unravel in several countries. In other words, elections were being held, but the winners were often bypassing their legislatures and imposing restrictions on free speech and media freedom.

Illiberal democracy: A political regime in which governments are democratically elected, but then work to weaken citizen rights and civil liberties.

The case of Poland illustrates the type. Home to the Solidarity trade union, founded in 1980 as the first officially recognized independent mass

SOPA Images / Contributor

Donald Tusk, Poland's new prime minister, makes his inaugural parliamentary speech in 2023, promising to turn the country back from the illiberal policies pursued by the Law and Justice party, whose leader Jarosław Kaczyński (centre of front row) listens.

movement in the Soviet bloc, Poland was seen as a leader in the move away from Soviet control. There was progress on democratization through the 1990s, and Poland also joined the European Union in 2004. Recent years, though, have seen the rise of the Law and Justice party, which has worked to impose a conservative Catholic social agenda on Poland and to tighten control over the judiciary, the media, and the bureaucracy. Although the party won more seats than any other party at the October 2023 elections, it did not win enough to prevent the Civic Coalition of parties critical of its policies forming a government under prime minister Donald Tusk, and working to move Poland back from illiberalism.

To some extent, the type overlaps with the hybrid regimes discussed in Chapter 5. It is also more of a moving target than is the case with consolidated democracies, particularly because of its association with populism, which has seen growing strength in some parts of the world in recent decades. Plattner (1998) argued that democracy and liberalism have repelled and attracted each other throughout history, that the rise of illiberal democracy was just another stage in the cycle, and that they could reverse course with help from consolidated democracies. For their part, Levitsky and Way (2002) argued that the concept muddied the waters of our understanding of democratic regimes, and instead proposed the alternative label of *competitive authoritarianism* (see Chapter 5).

DEMOCRACIES AND RIGHTS

Few concepts are more critical to the idea of democracy than individual rights. If such rights are well defined and protected, then democracy is healthy. If they are not, then democracy is compromised and – if the restrictions on rights go far enough – we move into the world of authoritarianism, despotism, and absolutism discussed in Chapter 5. Because rights are so fundamental to the definition of democracy, it is important to understand what they are and how they are protected and limited.

Human rights: The natural, universal, and inalienable rights to which all humans are entitled.

The broadest of all rights are **human rights**, which are distinctive in the sense that they are not regarded as having a political origin, but are instead defined as the rights to which humans are entitled simply by virtue of being human. In this sense, they are rights from 'below', deriving not from government or states but from human existence. The authoritative source on the list of human rights is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which was adopted in December 1948 by the new UN General Assembly. Among those rights are equal protection before the law, freedom of thought and conscience, the right to take part in government, equal pay for equal work, and freedom of movement.

Civil liberties: The rights that citizens have relative to government, and that should not be restricted by government.

Many of these rights overlap with **civil liberties**, which are the 'vertical' rights that citizens have relative to government, and that should not be infringed by the actions of government. These include the right to liberty, security, privacy, life, equal treatment, and a fair trial, as well as freedom of speech and expression, of assembly and association, and of the press and religion. Many of them also overlap with **civil rights**, which are the 'horizontal' rights that citizens have relative to one another, and that offer protection against discrimination based on such characteristics as race, gender, religion, age, and sexual orientation.

Civil rights: The rights that citizens have relative both to government and to other individuals.

It is not always easy to define where the limitations fall in terms of defining either civil liberties or civil rights, and even the most democratic societies have had difficulty deciding where the rights of individuals are compromised by the actions of government or of other individuals, or deciding which groups of people merit particular protection. Take, for example, the question of freedom of speech; democratic societies consider it an essential part of what makes them democratic, and yet there are many ways in which it is limited in practice. These include laws on the following:

- Slander: spoken defamation.
- Libel: defamation through other media.
- Obscenity: an offence against prevailing morality.
- Sedition: proposing insurrection against the established order.
- Hate speech: attacking a person or group on the basis of their attributes.

Defining what can be considered legitimate free speech, and where such speech begins to impinge upon the rights and sensibilities of others, is not easy. Should Western society, for example, respect the fact that showing the prophet Mohammed in the form of images is offensive to Muslims, or should Muslims acknowledge that many in the West consider such a limitation an infringement on their freedom of speech?

The concept of flawed democracy contained within the Democracy Index is particularly interesting in what it suggests about the limits on rights and liberties. For example, India is classified in the index as flawed, at least in part because of the generalized phenomenon of **structural violence**. This is a term used to describe intangible forms of oppression, or the 'violence' concealed within a social and political system. Hence the oppression of women is a form of structural violence perpetrated by male-dominated political systems, and extreme poverty is a form of violence perpetrated by one part of society on another. In India, structural violence can be found in the effects of poverty and caste oppression. These deep-rooted limitations on rights carry over to the political sphere by impacting the way in which Indians relate to their political system.

Structural violence: The social, political and/or economic oppression built into a system of government and directed at certain members or groups.

We have also long had plenty of examples of the infringement of rights even in countries that sit at the top of democratic rankings. Although South Korea is a full democracy, for example, it scored only 8.53 out of a possible 10 for civil liberties on the 2023 Democracy Index (compared, for example, to the 9.71 scored by Australia, Iceland, and Uruguay). It has been criticized in recent years by Human Rights Watch, a US-based interest group that keeps an eye on the state of human rights around the world, for restrictions on the freedom of expression, association, and assembly, and for discrimination against women, ethnic minorities, LGBTQ persons, and foreigners (Human Rights Watch, 2021). At the same time, it captured international news headlines in 2016 when – following major public protests – its National Assembly voted to impeach President Park Geun-Hye (the first woman to hold the South Korean presidency) for abuse of power, bribery, and extortion. The Constitutional Court upheld the impeachment, and former President Park began serving a 25-year prison term.

THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRATIC RULE

Just before Huntington's book on waves of democratization was published in 1991, the American political economist Francis Fukuyama was inspired by the end of the Cold War and the speed of the democratic transition in Eastern Europe to borrow from Hegel, Marx, and others in declaring the 'end of history', or the final triumph of democracy:

> What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history … That is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. (Fukuyama, 1989)

At least at first, all looked well as Russia seemed to be moving towards democracy in the 1990s, and as Eastern Europe tied itself more closely to the West and to Western ideas about democracy and free markets. Not all Russians were happy about the end of the Soviet Union, though, which Vladimir Putin was later to describe as 'the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the twentieth century'. It was also clear that Fukuyama had spoken too soon, and that the end of the Cold War – rather than bringing new opportunities – had brought new uncertainties, as well

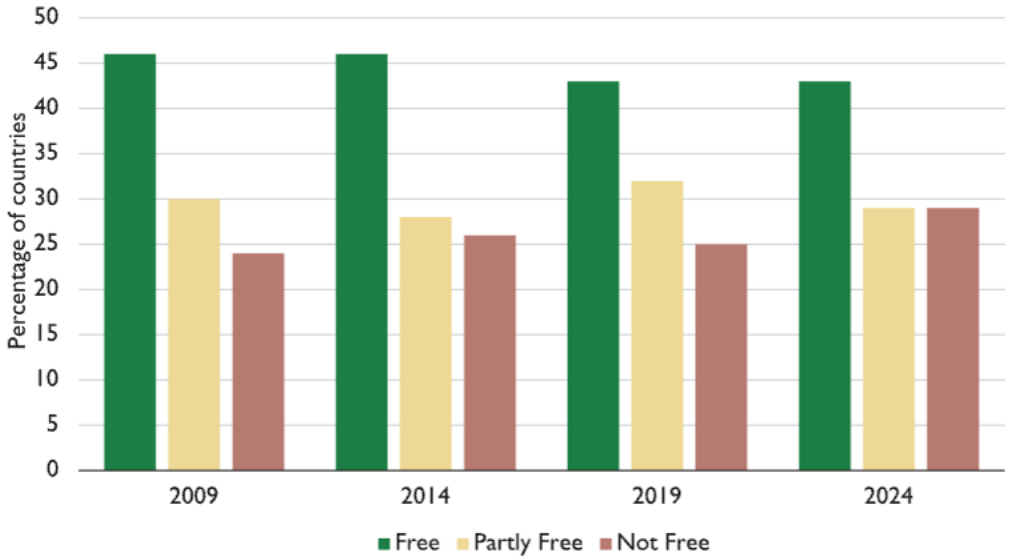


Figure 4.5 Global trends in democracy

Source: Based on Freedom House (2024).

as revealing many of the internal weaknesses of democracy in practice. The end of history thesis was also criticized for being too Western-centric (even US-centric), and for doing a disservice to comparative political study.

By 2008, the American political commentator Robert Kagan was writing of the 'return of history', arguing that the world had become 'normal again' in the sense that struggles for status and influence were back, along with the old competition between liberalism and autocracy, to which was added the new uncertainties arising from the struggle between radical Islam and Western secular powers. Since then, we have moved into the period of democratic regression discussed earlier in the chapter. The numbers are reflected in the data generated by Freedom House, whose report for 2024 noted the eighteenth consecutive year of net decline in political rights and civil liberties, along with an ongoing slight decline in the number of Free countries and an ongoing growth in the number of Not Free countries – see Figure 4.5.

Fukuyama long ago detached himself from his end of history optimism, although he has since argued that it remains an open question as to whether the backsliding of democracy is a market correction or a global depression (quoted in Luce, 2017). Wherever we go from here, many of today's political conversations are not about the health or the spread of democracy but about the challenges it faces even within those states we once thought to be firmly liberal democratic.

Among those challenges are the following: social disintegration, voter alienation, political polarization, the tensions between individual rights and democracy, and the manner in which competitive politics and economics can undermine the sense of community. For Rosenberg (quoted in Shenkman, 2019), the problem is simply that democracy is hard work, requiring people 'to respect those with different views from theirs and people who don't look like them. It asks citizens to be able to sift through large amounts of information and

process the good from the bad, the true from the false. It requires thoughtfulness, discipline and logic.'

The more specific challenges faced by democratic regimes include the following:

- Women continue to have less political power and opportunity than men, do not earn as much as men for equal work, and are still prevented from rising to positions of political and corporate leadership as easily as men.
- Racial and religious intolerance remain critical problems, with minorities often continuing to be pushed to the margins of society, and a backlash to migration posing a challenge to the progressive credentials of even the most open of societies.
- There is a persistent income gap between the rich and the poor, and levels of unemployment and poverty often remain disturbingly high. With both comes reduced political influence and opportunities, and sometimes political radicalization.

The most serious challenge faced by democracy, though, is the falling faith and trust in government addressed in Chapter 6, a trend that reflects less a concern with the concept of democracy than with the manner in which it is practised. Many see government as being dominated by elites, have less trust in their leaders, and feel that government is doing a poor job of dealing with pressing economic and social problems. As a result, they are either voting in smaller numbers, or moving away from established political parties and mainstream political engagement, or switching their support to candidates and leaders running on a platform of populism or extremism (see Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017).

In two recent edited collections, a series of connected and contrasting arguments are made about the current state of democracy. On the one hand, in a book titled *Democracy in Decline?*, Diamond and Plattner (2015) point to a fall in the number of democracies as reflected in the kind of objective measures used by Freedom House, but they also point to the more subjective question of the standing of democracy, and how it is viewed in terms of legitimacy and attractiveness. On the other hand, in a book titled *Authoritarianism Goes Global*, Diamond et al. (2016) argue that illiberal powers such as China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia have built new confidence and influence in the world, creating an 'authoritarian surge' based on the development of new tools to contain the spread of democracy and to challenge the liberal international political order. They have not only learned and used new means for repressing dissent and manipulating the media at home, but they have also learned how to better project their influence internationally. It was revealing, for example, that while the democratic world led the opposition to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, 45 countries either abstained or declined to vote in an October 2022 UN resolution condemning Russia; among them were China, India, Iran, Pakistan, South Africa, and Thailand.

Should we be optimistic or pessimistic about the future of democracy? It is true that no country with a sustained history of liberal democracy has ever

freely or deliberately opted for an alternative form of government. It is also true that liberal democracies have developed a solid record of interstate cooperation. The broad goals of the democratic model – including freedom, choice, security, and wealth – are widely shared. At the same time, democracies face significant internal inequalities, many of them are divided within themselves, and they face new challenges and threats. They clearly need to do much better in terms of meeting the core principles of democracy and making sure that the message of the benefits of democracy is sustained at a global level.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Is democracy – in practice – truly government by the people, or have other voices come to be heard more loudly?
- Does the internet allow or prevent the recreation of Athenian-style direct democracy in today's states?
- What are the appropriate limits on government in a democracy?
- What conditions are needed in order for democracy to flourish?
- How can democracies respond to the international threats posed by authoritarian regimes?
- Should we be optimistic or pessimistic about the future of democracy?

KEY CONCEPTS

- Checks and balances
- Civil liberties
- Civil rights
- Democracy
- Democratization
- Direct democracy
- E-democracy
- Flawed democracy
- Full democracy
- Human rights
- Illiberal democracy
- Liberal democracy
- Liberalism
- Limited government
- Polyarchy
- Public sphere
- Representative democracy
- Rule of law
- Structural violence

FURTHER READING

Dahl, Robert A. (2020) *On Democracy* (Yale University Press). A re-issue of the influential primer on democracy by one of its most influential proponents. (See *On Tyranny* in the next chapter for an antidote.)

Diamond, Larry, and Marc F. Plattner (eds) (2015) *Democracy in Decline?* (Johns Hopkins University Press). An edited collection looking at recent trends in democratic rule, asking if democracies are in decline.

Fuller, Roslyn (2019) *In Defence of Democracy* (Polity Press). A book arguing against recent criticisms of 'too much democracy', concluding that there are many reasons to continue to be optimistic about the future of democracy.

Haerpfer, Christian W., Patrick Bernhagen, Christian Welzel, and Ronald F. Inglehart (eds) (2019) *Democratization*, 2nd edn (Palgrave). An edited set of chapters on democratization in theory and in practice, including chapters dealing with seven regions of the world.

Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt (2018) *How Democracies Die* (Crown). A critical assessment of the possible dangers faced by democracy, using examples from history to speculate on modern regime breakdown.

Matsusuka, John G. (2020) *Let the People Rule: How Direct Democracy Can Meet the Populist Challenge* (Princeton University Press). A study that looks at referendums around the world in order to make the point that direct democracy can be a useful way of bringing policies back in line with the wishes of citizens.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Visit **bloomsbury.pub/comparative-government-and-politics-13e** to access additional materials to support teaching and learning.

SPOTLIGHT 4
INDIA

PROFILE

Often described as the world's largest democracy, India is also one of the most culturally and demographically varied countries in the world, and has the biggest population in the world, having recently overtaken China. After centuries of British imperial control (some direct, some indirect), India became independent in 1947. While it has many political parties, it spent many decades dominated by a single party (Congress), which since 2014 has lost ground to the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party. India has a large military and is a nuclear power, but its economy long remained notably staid, with many analysts arguing that its enormous potential was being held back by excessive state intervention and endemic corruption; changes in policy have recently helped address these problems, but India still suffers from religious and cultural divisions that have produced communal strife, and was downgraded in 2024 by Freedom House from Free to Partly Free.

Form of government	Federal parliamentary republic consisting of 25 states and seven union territories. Independence achieved 1947, and most recent constitution adopted 1950.
Executive	Parliamentary. The prime minister selects and leads the Council of Ministers (cabinet). The president, indirectly elected for a five-year term, is head of state, formally asks a party leader to form the government, and can take emergency powers.
Legislature	Bicameral Parliament: lower Lok Sabha (House of the People, 545 members) elected for renewable five-year terms, and upper Rajya Sabha (Council of States, 250 members) with most members elected for fixed six-year terms by state legislatures.
Judiciary	Independent Supreme Court consisting of 26 judges appointed by the president following consultation. Judges must retire at age 65.
Electoral system	Elections to the Lok Sabha are by single-member plurality. The Election Commission of India, established by the constitution, oversees national and state elections.
Parties	Multiple parties exist, but system long dominated by centrist Congress Party, recently supplanted by conservative Bharatiya Janata Party. Regional parties are also important.
Population	1,417 million
Gross Domestic Product	$3,417 billion
Per capita GDP	$2,410
Democracy Index rating	Flawed Democracy
Freedom House rating	Partly Free
Corruption score	39/100
Human Development Index rating	Medium

CASE STUDY: DEMOCRACY IN INDIA

Bloomberg / Contributor

Narendra Modi, India's prime minister, has led the successful rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party in recent years, but has also overseen an undermining of governing institutions and individual rights in a country long hailed as the world's largest democracy.

India is the clear exception to the thesis that stable democracy is limited to affluent states. In spite of enormous poverty and massive inequality, democracy is well-entrenched in India, which begs the question of how it has been able to consolidate democracy against the background of major economic and social challenges. Part of the answer lies in India's experience under British control: Britain often used indirect rule in India, allowing local elites to occupy positions of authority, where they experienced a style of governance which accepted some dispersal of power and often allowed the expression of specific grievances. The transition to independence – while far from peaceful – was gradual and considered, led by the Indian National Congress (founded in 1885), which built an extensive, patronage-based network that helped it govern a disparate country after independence.

Perhaps the critical factor in India's democratic success, however, was the pro-democratic values of the Congress elite. Put simply, democracy survived in India because that is what most of its leaders wanted. Practices associated with British democracy – such as parliamentary government, an independent judiciary, and the rule of law – were seen as worthy of emulation. In India, then, the consolidation of democracy was fundamentally an elite project.

Recent events have not been quite so positive. The steady rise of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party was capped when it won an outright majority at the 2019 elections. Its platform is based on the idea that Hindu faith and culture should shape state and government, an idea that runs counter to the secular principles built into the Indian constitution. This has caused particular tensions with India's enormous Muslim minority: about 200 million people, or 10 per cent of all the Muslims in the world. A new law passed in 2019 that was designed to create a path to Indian citizenship for migrants pointedly excluded Muslims, leading to concerns that they would become second-class citizens. It was just the latest in a series of steps that have undermined the protection of civil liberties, and undermined India's democratic standing.

Further reading

Datta, Rekha (2018) *Contemporary India* (Routledge).

Jaffrolet, Christophe (2021) *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy* (Princeton University Press).

Mitra, Subrata K. (2017) *Politics in India: Structure, Process and Policy*, 2nd edn (Routledge).

5

Authoritarian rule

CONTENTS

- Understanding authoritarian rule
- Authoritarian regime types
- Origins and evolution
- Forms of authoritarian rule
- The political impact of corruption
- The future of authoritarian rule

PREVIEW

While democracy has spread to many parts of the world since 1945, and many people now live in democracies, about as many still live under authoritarian rule. This means centralized government, power for the ruling elite, and limits on the freedoms of citizens. These conditions are not only widespread today, but have been the norm for most of human history. The last century will be remembered at least as much for the dictatorships it spawned – including Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia, and Mao's China – as for the democratic transitions at its close. Worryingly, the present era runs the danger of being remembered as one in which authoritarianism has threatened countries with a long democratic record (such as the United States, India, and Israel) as well as those that once seemed to be on the road to democracy (such as Hungary, Tanzania, and Turkey), and those in which authoritarian control has persisted or even deepened (such as China, Iran, and Russia).

This chapter follows the lead of the Democracy Index by dividing non-democracies into hybrid and authoritarian regimes. It begins with a survey of the two types and their qualities, before looking at the origins and evolution of authoritarianism, which has a longer history than democracy. The chapter then assesses the four main forms of authoritarian regime: absolute monarchies, presidential monarchies, ruling parties, and military government. It then reviews the particular dilemma of corruption, which is a universal problem, but more notably part of the political landscape in authoritarian regimes, and ends with a discussion of the possible future of authoritarianism.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Authoritarianism is just as complex and nuanced as democracy, with the added problem that it operates under few formal rules.
- About a quarter of the states in the world are classified by Freedom House as Not Free, and about half by the Democracy Index as either hybrid or authoritarian regimes.
- At the heart of authoritarianism is rule by an individual and a supporting clique, whose actions are often a cover for vulnerability.
- There is no agreed typology of authoritarian rule, but terms such as *coercion*, *patronage*, and *personalism* are frequently used to describe its features.
- Corruption exists wherever people are willing to abuse the offices they hold for private gain, but it plays a particularly telling role in authoritarian regimes.
- The number of authoritarian regimes has been growing, and democracy in many places is under assault from authoritarian leaders.

UNDERSTANDING AUTHORITARIAN RULE

For decades, Turkey's straddling of Europe and the Middle East has translated into contradictory political forces, pulling the country both towards and away from democracy. It long aspired to join the European Union, but failed to achieve the kind of democratic consistency that existing EU states look for in new members of the club. Matters took a turn for the worse in August 2014, when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan – who had been prime minister for 11 years – became Turkey's first directly elected president. While this was mainly a ceremonial position, Erdoğan used it to crack down on dissent and opposition. In 2016, an attempted coup in Turkey left nearly 300 people dead, giving Erdoğan an opening to arrest thousands of Turks accused of supporting the coup. In April 2017 he won a national referendum supporting a switch to a presidential system of government, greatly increasing his hold on power (see Cagaptay, 2017). Erdoğan called – and won – an early election in 2018, and was re-elected in 2023. All along, Turkey's rating in the Democracy Index remained unchanged as a hybrid regime, but its score fell from 5.12 in 2014 to 4.35 in 2022, pushing it closer to a rating of **authoritarianism**.

Authoritarianism: A political system in which government is controlled by a ruling elite, without an open mandate from citizens, who are denied equal rights.

Although authoritarianism has been much more common throughout history than democracy, it can – like democracy – be hard to pin down. Figure 5.1 summarizes the kinds of features we might expect to see in an authoritarian regime, ranging from weak and unaccountable political institutions to manipulated courts and a poor record on the protection of individual rights. However, authoritarianism, like democracy, fits within a range of possibilities, with no fixed model or template, and with features that vary by time and place.

If the perfect democracy is rule by the people, with all citizens of a community being guaranteed equal rights and having equal information, then authoritarianism is the opposite: power is centralized in the hands of a **dictatorship** and a supporting elite, the majority of citizens have limited influence over how the community is governed, and there are neither equal rights nor equal levels of information. In practice, degrees of authoritarianism range from absolute and sometimes violent

Dictatorship: A political system in which a leader or ruling elite uses a combination of repression and loyalty to remain in power.

Feature	*Qualities*
Power	Centralized in the hands of leaders and elites.
Institutions	Well defined and stable, but accountable only to the ruling elite.
Participation	A limited selection of forms of political participation and representation, and no guarantees that the voices of citizens will be heard effectively, if at all.
Rights	Relatively few limits on the powers of government, and a poor record on the protection of individual rights and freedoms, with limited or no independence for the judiciary.
Elections	A poor record on representative government, with elections – where they are held – accompanied by fraud, manipulation, and violence.
Opposition	Constrained, and subject to coercion and even violence.
Media	Limited and controlled, subject to political controls, and free to share only officially sanctioned opinions.

Figure 5.1 Features of authoritarian rule

control to looser forms of governance in which elements of democracy continue to survive. These degrees are reflected in the number of terms used in connection with political systems that are undemocratic; they include *absolutism*, *autocracy*, *despotism*, *dictatorship*, *tyranny*, *totalitarianism*, and even the less committed notion of *non-democracy* (see Márquez, 2017). There is little consistency in how they are used or defined, although there is an implied ranking, with *tyranny* and *totalitarianism* usually indicating the most extreme control of power.

While democratic leaders need to keep the support of voters, authoritarian rulers need to keep the support of their allies. This they do by rewarding those allies and by limiting mass participation. Ordinary people are unlikely to experience a knock on the door at midnight as long as they keep their distance from politics, and resist the temptation to openly oppose those in power. Once they start to rock the boat, though, it is a different matter, and they can expect trouble. In such a situation, governance is an uneasy combination of unlimited authority and political vulnerability.

Since authoritarian leaders so clearly work to stand above the law, the constitutional architecture of authoritarian regimes is a poor guide to how government works, and we instead find the following kinds of realities:

- Laws can be vague and contradictory, often creating a pretext for throwing critics and opponents into jail.
- The legislature and the judiciary are relatively weak, as well as being under-resourced and ineffective.
- Civil liberties are poorly respected, and the state often demands that private organizations be licensed.
- The absence of constitutional constraints leads to callous treatment of the powerless, particularly women, the poor, minority groups, non-nationals, and prisoners.
- With no enforceable legal framework to protect private property rights, authoritarian rule is often associated with economic stagnation. The price of the rulers securing a large slice of the pie is that few others can access the pie, generating more political vulnerability.

Although it is tempting to believe that citizens universally understand the benefits of democracy, and that authoritarian leaders struggle to keep control in the face of hostile public opinion, we saw in Chapter 4 that such optimism is misplaced. History did not end in the 1990s, and the collapse of communism did not bring democracy to Belarus or Kazakhstan, nor even to Russia. Similarly, the changes brought by the Arab Spring failed to gain much traction, and actually made matters worse in Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Where once it was suggested that democracy had brought an end to history, recent decades have seen authoritarianism becoming stronger.

AUTHORITARIAN REGIME TYPES

Just as there is a sliding scale of democratic regimes, so there is a sliding scale of authoritarian regimes. We can see this in the different scores given by Freedom House to the states it ranks as Not Free, as well as in the distinction made

by the Democracy Index between hybrid regimes and authoritarian regimes, as outlined in Table 5.1. It is unfortunate that the index uses the noun *regime*, though, because while it is almost synonymous – as we saw in Chapter 1 – with the term *political system*, it is often used in a pejorative sense to imply criticism, as when we see references to 'the Iranian regime' or 'the Putin regime'. It is important to remember that it has a more neutral meaning in political science.

Hybrid regimes

Hybrid regime: A political regime that has some of the appearances of being democratic, but whose institutions, processes, laws, and policies are manipulated to keep rulers or elite groups in power.

For the Democracy Index, a **hybrid regime** is one that combines elements of democracy and authoritarianism, while leaning towards the latter. Features include weaknesses in political culture, in the functioning of government, and in political participation. Elections are held, but are undermined by irregularities that often prevent them from being either free or fair, and government pressure on opposition parties and candidates is common. Corruption is usually widespread, civil society and the rule of law is weak, the judiciary lacks independence, and journalists are often harassed. The category overlaps with the idea of *competitive authoritarianism* outlined by Levitsky and Way (2010).

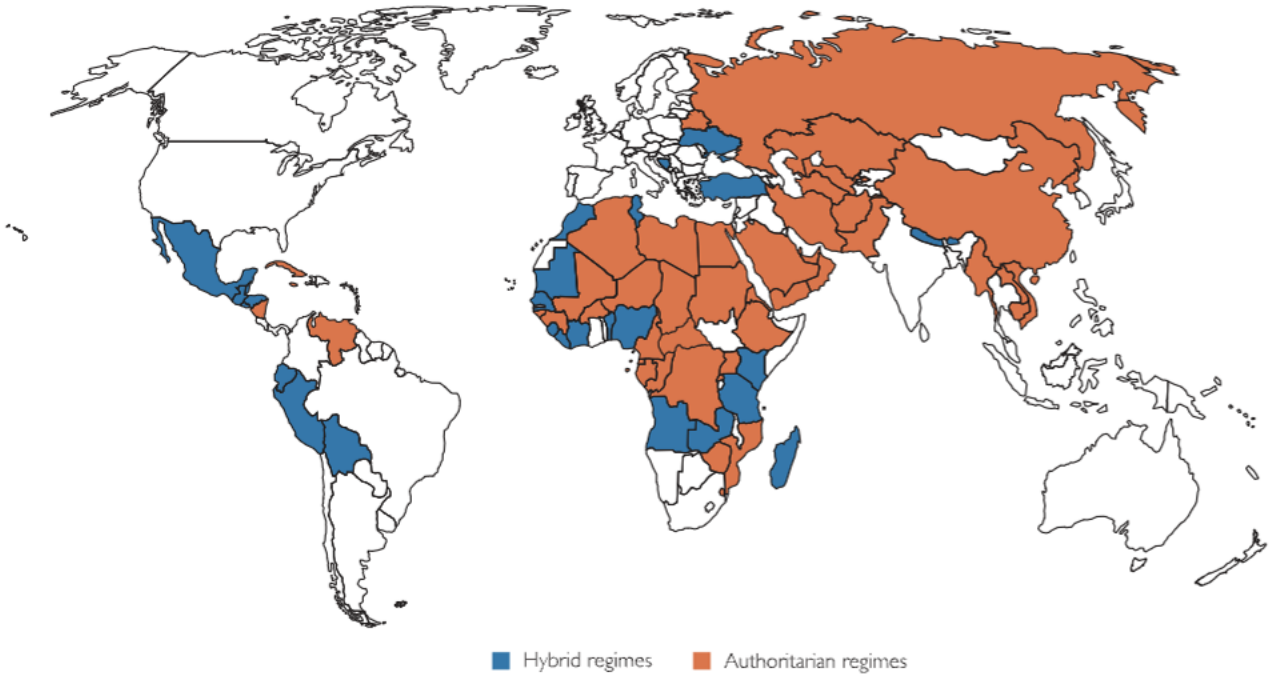
Table 5.1: Authoritarian regime types

Typology	Types and features	
Freedom in the World	Partly Free	Not Free
	States with weaker electoral processes, political participation, functioning of government, and civil liberties than those states ranked as Free in Chapter 4.	States with weak or non-existent electoral processes, controlled political participation, manipulated governmental functions, and little protection of civil liberties.
Number in 2024	56*	56
Democracy Index	Hybrid regimes	Authoritarian regimes
	Political systems appear democratic, but institutions, processes, laws, and policies are manipulated to keep rulers and their supporting elites in power. Scores of 4 to 5.99 out of 10.	The opposite of full democracies, with centralized political control, intolerance of opposition, and human rights abuses. Scores of 0 to 3.99 out of 10.
Number in 2023	34	59

Sources: Based on Economist Intelligence Unit (2024) and Freedom House (2024). For the latest information, see Economist Intelligence Unit at https://www.eiu.com and Freedom House at https://freedomhouse.org.

** This figure does not imply that Freedom House is more pessimistic about the political world. It uses only three categories, the second of which (Partly Free) straddles the Democracy Index categories of flawed democracies discussed in Chapter 4 and the hybrid regimes discussed in this chapter.*

Map 5.1 Hybrid and authoritarian regimes



Source: Based on Economist Intelligence Unit (2023).

This describes a system in which democratic institutions exist, elections are held regularly, and parties compete for power, but abuses by incumbent office holders give them a significant advantage over opponents. About three dozen states are ranked as hybrids in the Democracy Index, including examples from sub-Saharan Africa (including Kenya, Nigeria, and Zambia), Eastern Europe (Bosnia, Ukraine), Asia (Bangladesh, Nepal, Turkey), and South America (Bolivia, Honduras, Peru).

The leaders and ruling parties of hybrid regimes may be elected, but they have often used state resources and their influence over the media to determine the outcome of elections. This was illustrated during presidential elections in Uganda in January 2021. The incumbent Yoweri Museveni was running to extend his 34-year grip on power, and appeared to have a viable opponent in the form of Bobi Wine, a singer, actor, and member of the Ugandan Parliament. During the election campaign, Wine was arrested on charges of violating Covid-19 protocols, one of his bodyguards was killed after being run over by a truck belonging to the military police, and the Ugandan government shut down the internet two days before the election. Museveni claimed to have won re-election with just under 57 per cent of the vote, but the vote was described by foreign observers as fraudulent.

Once elected, governments in hybrid regimes show only a limited sense of constitutional restraint, and such concepts as fair play and individual rights barely register. Leaders might leave office because they are required to by constitutional limits on their terms, but the character of government does not much change from one leader to another. This is because hybrid regimes are normally founded on a powerful leader or political party, rather than on strong institutions.

Luke Dray / Stringer

Supporters of President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda celebrate his win in the presidential election of January 2021, allowing him a sixth five-year term in office.

In return for taking care of the needs of the people, leaders claim their respect, deference, and support. The law is used selectively, as a tool of power, so that while political opponents are subject to detailed legal scrutiny, supporters find that the law rarely intrudes on their activities: 'For my friends, everything; for my enemies, the law,' said Getúlio Vargas, one-time President of Brazil. In contrast to pure authoritarian regimes, the leader often provides effective governance, thus earning – as well as manipulating – popular support.

Authoritarian regimes

A state classified by the Democracy Index as an **authoritarian regime** has the kind of political system that most people would most readily associate with the idea of **autocracy** or dictatorship. In these states, elections – where they occur – are neither free nor fair, and the formal institutions of democracy have little substance. Civil liberties are infringed, the judiciary lacks independence, media are typically state-owned or controlled by groups connected to the ruling regime, criticism of the government is repressed, and censorship is pervasive. At their heart is a ruling leader, party, or clique which tolerates no substantial opposition, and works to hold on to power as long as possible. Nearly 60 states have these qualities, concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa (Chad, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe), and the Middle East and North Africa (Iran, Jordan, Libya, Saudi Arabia), with several also in Asia (China, North Korea, Russia, Vietnam).

Although many authoritarian leaders may appear to rule by fear, their actions are often driven by their own fears and vulnerabilities. Svolik (2012)

Authoritarian regime: A political regime based on submission to the authority of ruling elites, limited political pluralism, centralized political control, intolerance of opposition, and human rights abuses.

Autocracy: Literally 'rule by one', but while monarchy (also 'rule by one') is used in the context of hereditary rule, autocracy is a synonym for dictatorship.

Tools	Qualities
Coercion	Efforts to make people act against their will, with methods ranging from the subtle to the brutal.
Patronage	Incorporation of holders of power through the provision of resources and opportunities.
The military	High spending on the military, even if a country faces no security threats, helping buy off the opposition and suppressing domestic dissent.
The media	Control aimed at ensuring only favourable coverage of the government, and criticism of opponents.

Figure 5.2 Tools of authoritarianism

argues that dictators face two sets of conflicts: one with the masses they rule, and one with those with whom they share power. They lack an independent authority with the power to enforce agreements among key political actors, and violence is ever-present as a potential arbiter of conflicts. Svolik's study of more than 300 dictators who lost office between 1946 and 2008 through non-constitutional means found that barely 20 per cent left office as a result of a popular uprising or public pressure to democratize, while more than two-thirds were removed by regime insiders. 'Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown', wrote Shakespeare, an idea expanded by Winston Churchill when he noted that 'Dictators ride to and fro on tigers from which they dare not dismount'.

While in power, authoritarian leaders normally exploit four key control devices: coercion, patronage, the military, and the media (see Figure 5.2). Of these, **coercion** is described by Art (2012) as the 'core feature' of authoritarian regimes. Unlike persuasion, which aims to encourage a voluntary change in behaviour (such as supporting a particular policy or voting for a particular party), coercion uses methods that oblige people to act against their will. It ranges in quality from the subtle – where it becomes clear to the target, without words needing to be exchanged, that a failure to cooperate will count against them – to the brutally obvious, as reflected in the use of the military, secret police, militias, or even just armed thugs to implement policy.

Coercion: The use of threats, sanctions, or force against groups or individuals as a means of compelling them either to undertake or desist from a particular course of action.

Meanwhile, dictators manipulate power by using an unofficial **patronage** network in which other holders of power are incorporated by being provided with resources (such as jobs, or access to natural resources and other money-making opportunities) which they distribute, in turn, to their own supporters. (See also the discussion about clientelism in Chapter 13.) In this way, direct allegiance to one's patron, and indirect allegiance to the regime, becomes the key to a successful career. These patron-client pyramids are found in democratic regimes as well, but they are more central to understanding authoritarian regimes, where webs of allegiances often override the public–private divide. Institutions are weak, while pragmatic alliances are strong, holding the regime together.

Patronage: The support, privilege, opportunity, or encouragement given by one individual or organization to another, often tied to appointments to political office or access to political privileges.

ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

In the last chapter, we saw that the modern idea of democracy is relatively new: there were few democracies in existence after World War II, and what might be seen as the golden age of democracy came only with the end of empires and the end of the Cold War. By contrast, authoritarian rule has a long history. In fact, the capacity of leaders to wrest control – or to inherit power – and then to keep it, often by any means possible, but routinely at the expense of others, might even be seen as the 'natural' state of political affairs against which democracy has had to struggle to compete. (Ironically, though, we do not entirely understand the process by which autocracies emerge, or strengthen themselves; see *Using Theory 5*.)

The earliest organized political regimes were often strictly hierarchical, whether they were monarchies, empires, tribal or religious systems. There was often a ruler and/or a ruling class, which came to power not through elections or any other means of popular confirmation, but through conquest or heredity. Rule was typically expressed through violence, coercion, unquestioned loyalty, and even – in the cases of European monarchs – the principle of **divine right**. As European imperialism expanded overseas, government – no matter what degree of democracy was being achieved at home – was expressed mainly through authoritarian rule by imperial powers.

Divine right: The historical principle that European monarchs derived their right to rule directly from God, and not from the people.

Authoritarianism developed a particularly long and unfortunate history in Latin America (Levitsky and Murillo, 2019). Most states in the region became independent in the period 1810–25, but most came to be plagued by military interference in government: military officers took power by force, removed civilian leaders, installed new governments, or played a strong role in politics from behind the scenes. Matters were made worse during the Cold War by persistent US interference in the region as it sought to bolster regimes that it identified as allies in the Cold War, regardless of how authoritarian they were. Latin American politics often came to rely on military leadership, as reflected in the sheer number of military coups in the region: 12 successful coups in Bolivia between 1950 and 1984, for example, and four in Argentina between 1955 and 1976 (Powell and Thyne, 2011). The long-term persistence of military influence in the region is also telling: the military was behind the removal of the elected government in Ecuador in 2000, in Venezuela in 2002, in Honduras in 2009, and 2019 in Bolivia.

In the last chapter, we saw that Huntington identified three waves of democracy, but that he also identified two reverse waves: the first of these took place from 1922 to 1942 as **totalitarianism** came to Germany, Italy, and the Soviet Union. Totalitarianism is rare today (North Korea is the last remaining example of a totalitarian system), but remains an important point of reference, distinguished by Roberts (2020) as follows:

Totalitarianism: The most absolute form of government, based around a supreme leader, a single guiding ideology, and total political control over all aspects of public and private life.

- Liberal democracy places the greatest premium on individual freedom, including the freedom to take part in public life.
- Authoritarianism – with its emphasis on the control of society – allows political participation and freedom within a restricted framework.

USING THEORY 5

AUTOCRATIZATION

Autocratization: The process by which societies move away from democracy and towards political regimes that are more repressive, and in which political participation and expression are restricted and controlled.

In the *Using Theory* feature in the last chapter, we looked at democratization: how and why societies become democratic, and the conditions under which they might stay that way. In this feature, we look at the contrasting phenomenon of **autocratization**, about which much less is understood because it is a newer topic of research and study. It is defined by Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) as a 'substantial *de facto* decline of core institutional requirements for electoral democracy', and by Kneuer and Demmelhuber (2021) as the process of change that replaces democracy with autocracy.

Although there was interest in studying autocracies and autocratization during the Cold War, when there were plenty of examples to use as cases, most political scientists were more interested in trying to understand democratization. The prospects for democracy seemed to strengthen with the end of colonialism, and then with the end of the Cold War (see Chapter 4). Then came the earliest signs of a democratic reversal or backsliding in several countries, since when political science has been struggling to catch up and to develop explanations for autocratization (Cassani and Tomini, 2018).

While we can often see it happening, or at least suspect that it is happening, we are much less certain about why it happens. The simplest explanation might be to take the steps leading to democracy – outlined in *Using Theory 4* – and reverse them. Instead of liberalization initiated by a ruling elite, leading to a process of transition, consolidation, and deepening, what we would see instead is more control exerted by a ruling elite, followed by a similar process of transition, consolidation, and deepening.

More people might be encouraged to collaborate, inequalities might lead to a loss of faith in democracy, charismatic leaders might claim to offer solutions to real and imagined threats, the free media and the opposition might be portrayed as the enemy, and of course there will be a degree of coercion. We should also not forget that authoritarian regimes are occasionally kept in place or encouraged through the influence of an external power: the US supported many such regimes during the Cold War – including Chile, Iran, and South Vietnam – because it was in US strategic interests so to do, and Russia continues today to support authoritarian governments in Belarus, Myanmar, and Syria for similar reasons.

Another theory about autocratization has been developed by Kneuer and Demmelhuber (2021), who make the argument that at least part of the explanation lies in the existence of countries that act as 'authoritarian gravity centres', some of them actively promoting autocracy in other countries, and others acting as neutral sources of attraction towards autocracy. This push and pull phenomenon can be found to different degrees, they argue, in the regional role of countries such as China, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela, that are willing and able to influence their neighbours while also continuing to build on their autocratic methods at home.

We are most likely to see autocratization happening in states that have never been fully democratic, so it is more likely to be a process of deepening rather than of wholesale conversion. Autocratization has also been a concern in democracies, though, as in the cases of Hungary under Viktor Orbán or the United States under

Donald Trump. However we understand it, there are still more questions than answers about the process of autocratization, including how and why it happens, how we know it is happening, whether or not it is reversible, the preconditions needed, and what – if anything – can be done to address it; see *Exploring Problems 5*, later in this chapter.

- Totalitarianism denies individual freedom altogether, both to maximize control and to mobilize a population. Its features include a dominating leader portrayed as working in the benevolent interests of the people, a single guiding ideology based on claims of the need to strive towards building an ideal society, and a tightly controlled society in which all aspects of life are politicized.

The archetypal totalitarian regime was that dominated by Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union between the late 1920s, when he came to power, and his death in 1953 (see McCauley, 2019). Even before he took over, the USSR had moved away from Marxist ideals, and Stalin ruled through an absolutist and unyielding dictatorship that demanded unquestioning support for the state, the party, and its leaders. Stalin used systematic and calculated oppression to enforce his reforms, in the process of which perhaps as many as 20 million people died from famine, execution, or war, and many millions more were purged, or exiled to concentration camps. Stalinism also meant the elimination of human rights, the encouragement of a cult of personality, the use of secret police to identify and remove rivals, and the establishment of a command economy (see Chapter 18) in which all economic decisions were made by state planners, as a result of which the Soviet bureaucracy became both massive and massively inefficient.

Huntington's second reverse wave came in the 1960s as military coups removed elected governments in multiple countries, notably in sub-Saharan Africa. Most states in the region achieved independence between the late 1950s and the early 1970s, but they were left in varying degrees of readiness to govern themselves. Several soon fell into disarray as ethnic and economic divisions surfaced, and the military often stepped in supposedly to restore order, but then held on to power. This was the case, for example, in Nigeria. It became independent in 1960, and while Britain – the former colonial power – thought that it had prepared Nigeria for self-government, the country was ethnically divided, and within six years had suffered its first military coup in which the incumbent president was murdered. The military retained control for 13 more years, during which Nigeria experienced three more coups and a civil war. Civilians were eventually restored to power in 1979, but only for four years. The military was in control again from 1984 to 1999, since when civilians have ruled and we have seen several changes of leadership.

Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) have recently suggested that a third and gradual wave of autocratization has been underway since the mid-1990s, and – most

worrying of all – that it mainly affects democratic regimes. Most of the reversals, they argue, have happened with leaders coming to power through normal democratic processes but then gradually and substantially undermining and eroding democratic norms without abolishing key democratic institutions. As examples, they point to Brazil, Ghana, Hungary, Nicaragua, Russia, Thailand, Turkey, and Venezuela. For examples of more autocratization within autocracies, they point to Bangladesh, Egypt, Haiti, Pakistan, and Yemen.

FORMS OF AUTHORITARIAN RULE

In their efforts to pin down the character of authoritarianism, political scientists have developed many ways of categorizing its different forms: Geddes (1999) lists three, Lai and Slater (2006) list four, Linz (2000) lists seven, and Merkel (2010) lists nine. What this shows is that there is no agreed typology of authoritarianism, the main problem being that neither government nor politics are static in authoritarian regimes: circumstances change, and regimes find themselves being reshaped by new opportunities and limitations, and subject to new interpretations by political scientists. Military governments, for example, were once common in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa, but for a variety of reasons – discussed later in this section – are now more unusual.

Despotism: The exercise of absolute power, often characterized by the abuse of the powers of office, arbitrary choices, and the use of violent intimidation. The term is interchangeable with *dictatorship*, *tyranny*, and *autocracy*.

It is also important to understand that while authoritarian rule is usually associated with dictators and **despotism**, and dictators are commonly portrayed as unpredictable, repressive, and eccentric, authoritarianism is not always openly on display. Its inner workings are often shrouded in secrecy and security, making it more difficult to study than democracy (Ezrow and Frantz, 2011). It also exists in different circumstances to different degrees, as reflected in the reference by Brooker (2014) to 'democratically disguised dictatorships'. These might, for example, hold elections, but will structure and organize them so that opposition parties win seats, but never in enough numbers to threaten or become the government.

Authoritarianism can also involve a degree of happenstance, with strong leaders and/or ruling groups coming to power by accident, or exploiting opportunities that come their way, or simply falling into bad habits. In few cases has this been more clear than in Syria, where Hafez al-Assad (1971–2000) established an authoritarian regime, and hoped to be succeeded by his eldest son Bassel. When the latter died in a car accident in 1994, Hafez recruited his younger son Bashar (b. 1965) to succeed him. At the time, Bashar was training in London to be an ophthalmologist, but he was quickly transformed into a president-in-waiting. He succeeded his father in a referendum in 2000, has since been reconfirmed in an uncontested referendum and two manipulated elections, and oversaw a violent response to Arab Spring protestors in 2011, sparking a lengthy civil war. In just a few years, a medical doctor had been converted into one of the world's most brutal dictators.

In spite of these doubts, it is important for the purposes of orderly comparison to pin down different forms of authoritarianism so as to be able to work through what might otherwise be a complex and confusing set of options. Broadly speaking, there are four key types, summarized in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2: Forms of authoritarian rule

Form	Features	Examples
Absolute monarchy	A sovereign exerts control, with other members of the royal family in key political and military posts.	Bahrain, Brunei, Eswatini, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates.
Presidential monarchy	A president exerts control, without term limits, and with opponents kept off-guard and the opposition marginalized.	Several former Soviet republics (including Russia), and multiple sub-Saharan African states (including Angola, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Uganda).
Ruling party	Dominance by a single party, often combined with a strong president.	Several African states and remaining communist states.
Military rule	Government by the military, often ruling through a junta comprising the leaders of each branch of the armed forces.	Many African, Asian, and Latin American countries in the decades following World War II. Less common today.

Absolute monarchy

In contrast to the constitutional monarchies of Europe, where kings and queens survive only as figureheads with few significant powers (see Chapter 8), an **absolute monarchy** (sometimes known as a ruling monarchy) still wields often considerable political power. While undemocratic, such monarchs can provide a stable framework for the exercise of traditional authority, in which rulers show paternalistic concern for their subjects.

Absolute monarchy: A regime type in which a monarch wields power over a state, and in which all other institutions of government are marginal. Should not be confused with the limited powers of a constitutional monarchy (see Chapter 8).

They are particularly important in the Middle East, where several have shown remarkable resilience; the Al Said dynasty, for example, has ruled Oman since 1749. Major oil and natural gas reserves give several of them – such as Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates – considerable global influence. At the same time, we need to be careful how we apply the term *monarchy* (literally, 'rule by one') in these states, for three main reasons:

- The titles taken by Arab 'monarchs' reflect tribal or Islamic tradition, as in *emir* (leader or commander), *sheikh* (revered leader of the tribe), or *sultan* (a leader who possesses authority).
- Rather than a single monarch, authority is often exercised by the senior members of the ruling dynasty.
- While the king typically designates a crown prince as his preferred successor, custom requires that a clan council meets after the monarch's death to confirm or change this appointment.

Authority in these examples is owed to the ruler, rather than to a more abstract entity such as a state or party; the ruler is constrained neither by law nor by competitive election. Because the ruler (always a man) is expected to take

Mikhail Svetlov / Contributor

Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud during a visit to Russia to meet with President Vladimir Putin. Saudi Arabia is a classic example of a political system based around an absolute monarchy.

responsibility for his people, they have the right to petition him on individual matters. However, the petitioner requests benevolent treatment, not the implementation of constitutional rights. The abstract idea of a state linking rulers and citizens is weak, as are such concepts as constitutions, rights, interest groups, the separation of powers, and the rule of law. Several kingdoms, notably Kuwait, have now established consultative assemblies, but this has not led to a transition to a constitutional monarchy.

In Saudi Arabia, the core of government is formed by a sprawling royal family, led by an influential group of several hundred princes. Advancement within the ruling family depends less on merit than on proximity to the family's network of advisers, friends, and guards. The family, itself divided into factions, controls the leading institutions of the state, providing a form of dispersed collective leadership and a barrier to radical change: family members occupy the key positions on the Council of Ministers, serving as a bridge between the government and the military. Although political parties are banned, some mechanisms of representation have emerged, adding an institutional veneer to a traditional regime. The Consultative Council, for example, with a non-princely and technocratic membership, is expected to advise the King, while rulers also keep an eye on the issues raised on social media.

A variation on the theme of an absolute monarchy can be found in Iran, which has a unique regime type in which religion continues to play a formal legal role. There is a directly elected president and legislature, but real power lies with Muslim clerics, the most senior of whom is the Supreme Leader. Chosen

by the Assembly of Experts, a gathering of 86 Islamic scholars, the leader has a lifetime appointment as head of state, and has many executive powers, including control of foreign and economic policy. There have so far been only two holders of the office: the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1979–89) and the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (since 1989). Government is based on strictly enforced traditional, male-dominated Islamic codes, the Interior Ministry still makes extensive use of informants, and the state employs arbitrary arrests as a form of control through fear (Ehteshami, 2017).

Presidential monarchy

While monarchs usually come to office through heredity, and can expect to stay there for life, there are many examples of authoritarian leaders who become presidents and then – despite having to stand for re-election – mould the job into a life-time appointment. They thus create what Apter (1965) described as a **presidential monarchy**. Some go even further – as with the Duvaliers in Haiti, the Assads in Syria, and the Kims in North Korea – by creating a political family dynasty. The current record for a non-monarchical political leader (see Figure 5.3) is held by President Teodoro Obiang Nguema of Equatorial Guinea, who came to power in 1979, has since won six deeply flawed elections, and – thanks in part to his adept use of his country's oil wealth to reward supporters – was still in charge as this book went to press 45 years later. In 2012 he appointed his son Teodorin as vice president, with an eye to the succession.

Presidential monarchy: A regime type in which a dictator holds the office of president and works to keep the job for life, in the manner of a monarch.

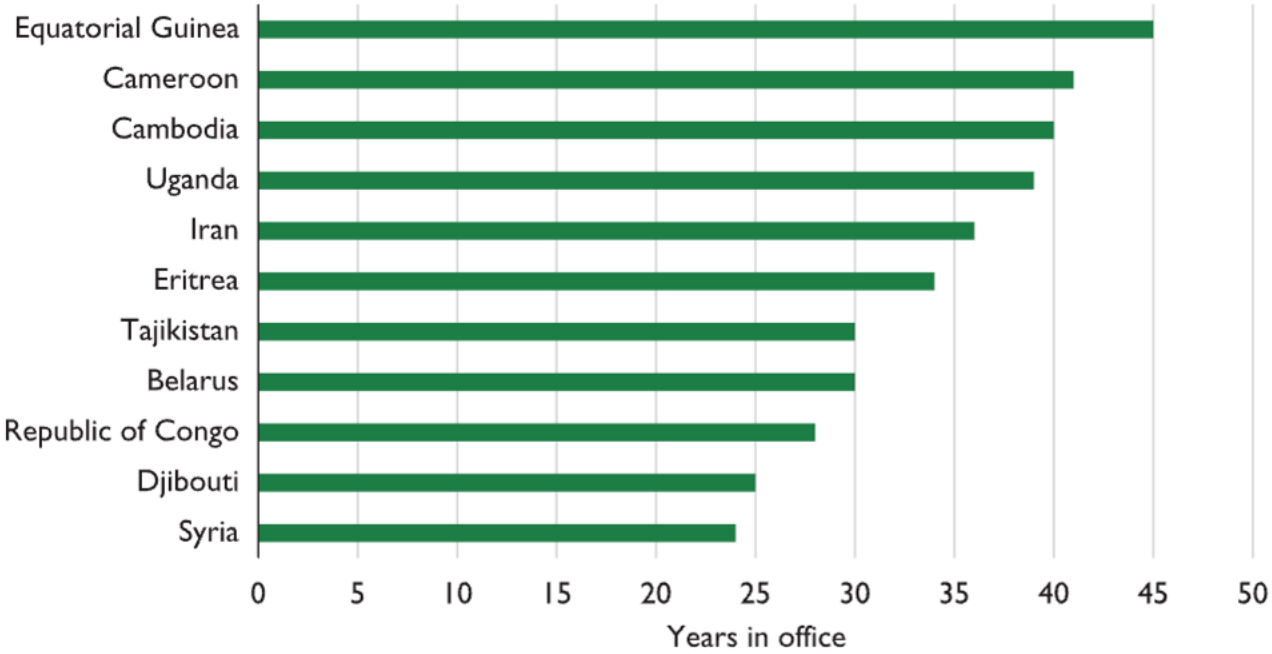


Figure 5.3 Countries with the longest-serving political leaders

Note: These were the data as this book went to press in mid-2024. Uganda is considered a hybrid regime; all others are classified as authoritarian regimes. Constitutional monarchs are excluded. Russia is excluded because Vladimir Putin had to step down after his first two terms in office (even though he continued to control government as prime minister).

Personalism: A form of governance in which authority is based less on the office held than on personal links between rulers and their patrons, associates, clients, and supporters.

Cult of personality: An arrangement in which leaders use the media, propaganda, and political institutions to ensure their dominance of a political system.

Under these circumstances, the executive evolves into a system of **personalism** or personal rule (Jackson and Rosberg, 1982; Kendall-Taylor et al., 2016), where personalities matter more than institutions, and politics takes precedence over government. The reach of the leader is often reflected in a **cult of personality**, through which the leader comes to dominate the consciousness of the people. He (no dictator in the modern era has been a woman) routinely dominates news headlines, his picture or image is omnipresent, he provides whatever energy the regime possesses, and the stability of the political system depends heavily on his control. The result is often poor governance, decisions taken at the whim of the leader, and – should the leader appear vulnerable or have been removed from office – a struggle over succession.

Personalism is particularly clear in those former Soviet republics that failed to move on from their authoritarian background, such as Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and, of course, Russia. In the case of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko (born 1954) has maintained a tight grip on power since winning office in 1994. While most of his Western neighbours have been building free-market democracy, Lukashenko maintains Soviet-era policies, including state ownership of key industries. He maintains close relations with Putin's Russia, has been described as Europe's last dictator, and began his sixth term after contested elections held in 2020 (see Chapter 14).

Elsewhere, many sub-Saharan African states have experienced long periods of rule by powerful leaders around whom political systems revolve. A prime example is Zimbabwe, ruled by Robert Mugabe between 1980 and 2017. He proved adept at wrong-footing his opponents (using land confiscated from white farmers as a tool for rewarding his supporters), marginalized and divided the political opposition, stoked the fires of ethnic division, and along the way drove the economy into the ground (see Compagnon, 2011). As advancing age began to impact Mugabe's health, rumours began to circulate that his wife Grace (known as 'Gucci Grace' for her expensive shopping habits) was wielding growing power behind the scenes. The 93-year-old Mugabe was finally removed from power in a military coup in November 2017 (although the military denied that it was a coup), and was replaced by First Vice-President Emmerson Mnangagwa, who brought little change to Zimbabwe.

In North Korea, meanwhile, the Kim family has pushed the country into totalitarianism (see French, 2014). Kim Il-Sung was Supreme Leader from 1948 until 1994, and was succeeded by his son Kim Jong-Il, who was succeeded in 2011 by his son Kim Jong-Un. The current Kim is uncontested holder of numerous key positions, including chair of the ruling Workers' Party, chair of the Central Military Commission, and Supreme Commander of the military, in which he holds the rank of Marshal. Kim also maintains a cult of personality, and his administration maintains a network of prison camps for the most incorrigible opponents of the regime. There is an elected Supreme People's Assembly, but it meets only twice annually for a few days at a time, and while elections are held every five years, only one candidate is fielded for each district. Meanwhile, an inflexible economic system has led not just to stagnation but also to mass starvation. Even

Kim's power is far from unlimited, though; he depends on patronage by China and the continued support of his own military to remain in power.

Ruling party

In contrast to the personalism found in ruling and presidential monarchies, some authoritarian regimes are based on the dominance of single **ruling party** that monopolizes public authority, whether in the name of economic modernization, social transformation, or national revival. The numbers of such parties have declined, but they are still found in the last remaining communist states and in a few African states where a single party continues to win the vast majority of seats at elections.

Ruling party: A regime type in which power is controlled and manipulated by a single political party, which provides only token opportunities (if any) to the opposition.

Communist parties once governed nearly two dozen states containing more than 1.5 billion people, or about one-third of the world's population (Holmes, 1997). There are just five 'communist' states remaining (see Table 5.3), and most are undergoing cautious political change along with faster free-market economic change. Even so, the sheer size and reach of the biggest of these cases – China – makes this a model that we need to continue to understand; see *Spotlight 5* on China at the end of this chapter.

Although ruling parties can still be found outside the communist world, they are increasingly rare. Most African states (including Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, and Zambia) were once run on this basis, but almost all have now switched either to more competitive multi-party systems, or – as in the cases of Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, and Sudan – to dominant-party systems. Often, the party is the vehicle rather than the driver, with real authority resting with a dominant president, military ruler, or political elite. In other words, the power of a ruling party can sometimes be hard to distinguish from the power of the leader of the party, and many authoritarian

Table 5.3: Communist party states

State	Communist rule established	Key features
North Korea	1948	A totalitarian regime led by the Kim family for three generations. Strong military influence, the official ideology stressing national independence and self-reliance.
China	1949	The Communist Party retains tight political control while leading substantial and successful economic reform.
Cuba	1961	Long dominated by Fidel Castro and then by his younger brother Raúl. A new opening to the United States since 2015 has brought only limited change.
Laos	1975	The partly liberalized economy of Laos has grown significantly, albeit from a low base.
Vietnam	1976 (North Vietnam 1954)	As in China, the Communist Party has initiated economic reform while retaining a political monopoly.

regimes are an amalgam of party rule and personal rule. When the leader or the elite goes, so does the party.

The case of the National Democratic Party (NDP) in Egypt is illustrative. Until the Arab Spring, the party formed part of an established structure of power based on a strong presidency and an extended bureaucracy. Within this framework, however, the NDP was the junior partner: it was less a policymaking force than an arena for furthering political and business careers. With the 2011 Egyptian revolution, the long-standing president – Hosni Mubarak – was removed from power and the party was outlawed. There are now dozens of parties active in Egypt, although President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (in office since 2014) labels himself an independent, as did about 55 per cent of the representatives who were elected or appointed to the Egyptian legislature after the 2015 elections, and 20 per cent of those elected or appointed in 2020.

Military rule

Military rule: A regime type in which the government is made up of members of the military, or in which civilian leaders are controlled by military leaders.

In the same vein as ruling parties, **military rule** is no longer as common as it once was. During the second half of the twentieth century, military governments could be found in many parts of Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia. Today, we are more likely to find leaders who come to power in a military coup and then transform themselves into civilian leaders, or regimes in which the military influences civilian governments from behind the scenes. After a bloodless coup in Thailand in 2006, for example, the country experienced phases of both military and civilian rule, with the latter often using the military to contain anti-government protests. While they may be rare, though, military governments remain a variety of authoritarian rule that is still important to understand.

Coup d'état: An illegal seizure of political power, usually by the military.

Usually ushered in by a **coup d'état**, or an illegal seizure of power, military rule typically involves the suspension of all other key political institutions except the bureaucracy, the courts, and the police, and governs on the basis of the military principles of hierarchy and the absence of negotiation. In many sub-Saharan African cases, military leaders once typically justified the seizure of power by arguing that civilians were doing a poor job of governing, and claiming that power would be returned to the civilians once a new and more effective system of government was established. The military leaders then often decided to stay on indefinitely, or tried to reinvent themselves as civilian politicians.

Today, the military – where it still plays a role in authoritarian government – remains an important element in the support base of civilian rulers. For example, the stance of the military was decisive in determining the success of the Arab uprisings of 2011. Where the army remained loyal to the regime, as in Syria, the government could fight the disparate opposition. Where the military declined to repress protestors, as in Egypt, the regime fell. So the relative rarity of military rule does not signal the end of political influence by the armed forces. When new civilian rulers are unable to limit the generals to a professional military role, the armed forces will continue to dominate, supervise, or constrain the government, compromising its democratic credentials.

Recent developments in sub-Saharan Africa point to a worrying return of military government. Already the region with a history of the most coups (whether failed or successful; see Figure 5.4), there were successful coups in 2020–23 in Burkina Faso, Chad, Gabon, Guinea, Mali, Niger, and Sudan, and failed coups in Guinea Bissau and in Sao Tome and Principe. It is too early to be sure what is happening, but most of the long-term explanations for military government may still apply; they include weak political parties, weak civilian government, real or imagined threats to the position of the military, ethnic or religious conflict, or indiscipline within the military.

THE POLITICAL IMPACT OF CORRUPTION

For several years now, Somalia has had the dubious distinction of being ranked as one the most corrupt countries (if not *the* most corrupt country) in the world. This, at least, is the calculation of the authors of the Corruption Perceptions Index, published annually since 1995 by Transparency International, a Berlin-based non-governmental organization. In the 2022 index (Transparency International, 2022), which argued that most countries in the world were failing to stop corruption, Somalia was ranked in last place out of 180 countries, with a score of 12 out of 100. (At the opposite end of the scale, Denmark ranked in first place with a score of 90.) The country had been 'mired in a circle of violence and instability for over three decades', the index reported, 'with practically no means to curb rampant corruption'. One of the first actions taken by President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud upon his election to a second term in office in October 2022 was to make matters worse by dissolving two key anti-corruption bodies, the Judicial Service Commission and the Anti-Corruption Commission.

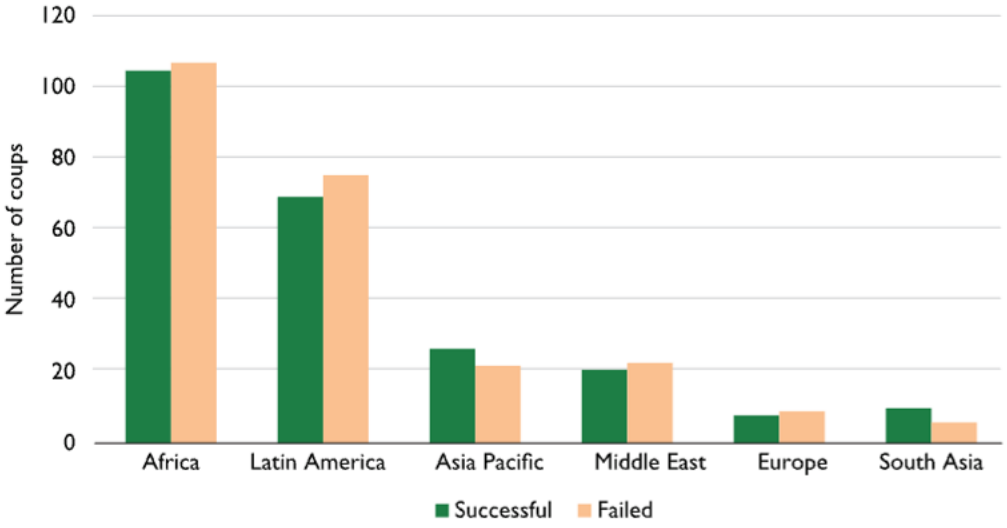


Figure 5.4 Military coups by region, 1950–22

Source: Based on data in Powell and Thyne (2024).

Corruption: The abuse of office for private gain.

Corruption is far from unique to authoritarian regimes, and can be found at every level of government and administration in every society – even democracies – where people are willing to abuse public office for private gain. However, corruption plays a particularly telling role in hybrid and authoritarian regimes, being both a cause and an effect of the kind of power that authoritarian leaders wield. In the famously cynical observation of the nineteenth-century British politician Lord Acton:

> Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority: still more when you super add the tendency or the certainty of corruption by authority. (Acton, quoted in Figgis and Laurence, 1907)

Corruption occurs when someone in a position of authority – who could be a member of a government, a judge, a bureaucrat, a customs official, or even a staff member in a university admissions office – provides a benefit in exchange for an incentive, rather than on the basis of entitlement. The incentive may persuade officials to do what they should have done anyway, or to do it more promptly, but the exchange typically involves breaking the law. Most worryingly, corruption can undermine the quality of governance and the efficiency of an economy. It replaces efforts to promote the public good with efforts to promote the private good, diverts limited resources away from those who most need them, discourages foreign investment, corrodes public trust in government, and places the interests of those willing and able to break the law above the interests of the population as a whole.

Political corruption comes in many different forms, including the following:

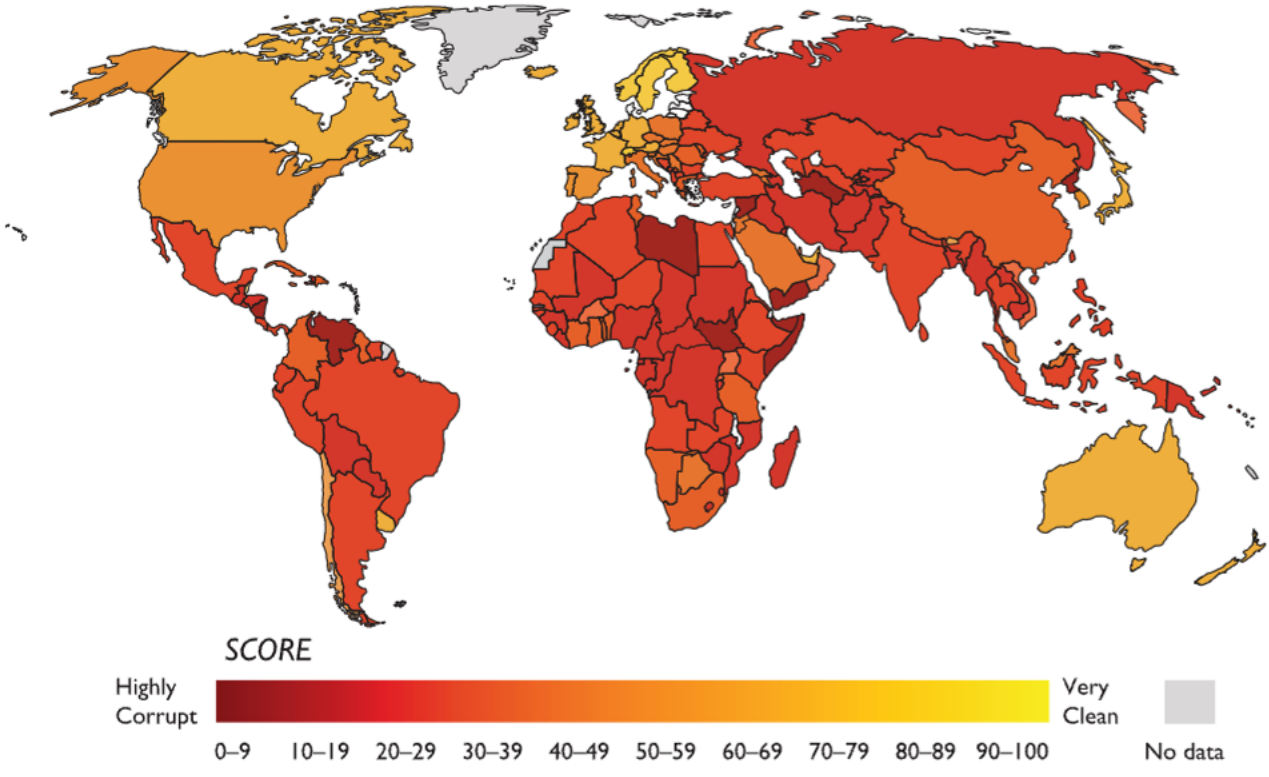
- *Electoral fraud* involves manipulating the outcome of elections, whether by redrawing electoral districts, making it difficult for voters to cast their ballots, intimidating opposition candidates and their supporters, or artificially expanding the electoral roll by double-counting voters or adding fake or dead voters.
- The giving of a *bribe* to a government official or a police officer.
- *Influence peddling*, where someone sells their influence in government, as when officials use their office to ensure that a particular company is awarded a public contract.
- *Patronage* was discussed earlier, and in many forms is legitimate, but becomes corrupt when it involves leaders selecting less qualified over more qualified candidates for office in return for their political support.
- *Nepotism* or *cronyism*, the former involving favouring relatives, while the latter involves favouring personal friends, for example in being selected as candidates in elections, in being appointed to government office, or in being awarded government contracts.
- *Embezzlement* involves the theft of public funds or resources, as in the case of Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman, a government minister in Malaysia who was considered a rising star in national politics until he was charged in 2023

with embezzlement. He was found guilty of abetting the misappropriation of more than $200,000 from the account of his political party, and was sentenced to seven years in prison as well as two lashes of the whip.

- *Kickbacks* occur when government officials use their position to offer a contract for public work to a company in return for a share of the payment made to the company.

Measuring and quantifying corruption is not easy, mainly because it is by definition an illegal and covert activity. In terms of making comparisons, the best guide we have comes in the form of the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) published by Transparency International. It uses a variety of governmental and non-governmental sources to rank perceptions of corruption around the world, but the key word here is *perception*; the index reflects how countries are regarded by those who know them, rather than providing a direct and objective measure of corruption itself. The index is based on a compilation of information from banks, foundations, and interest groups. The overlap with forms of political rule is close, the least corrupt countries corresponding with full democracies, and the most corrupt overlapping with authoritarian regimes (see Map 5.2).

Map 5.2 Corruption around the world



Source: Transparency International (2023). For the latest information, see Transparency International at https://www.transparency.org.
Note: Countries are ranked on a scale between zero (Highly Corrupt) and 100 (Very Clean). Somalia scored lowest at 11 and Denmark scored highest at 90.

That even the most advanced democratic regimes experience corruption is reflected in the cases of Denmark and New Zealand, which usually sit at the top of the Transparency International rankings (although this does not mean that they are the least corrupt countries so much as those where corruption is least evident). Recent CPI reports note that Denmark lacks transparency in political and campaign financing, has outdated laws on freedom of information, and provides insufficient protection to whistle-blowers. Meanwhile, New Zealand was criticized for waiting until 2015 to ratify the 2003 United Nations Convention Against Corruption.

These are minor concerns, though, when compared with the situation in North Korea and Somalia, both authoritarian regimes that routinely rank at the bottom of the Corruption Perceptions Index. In the case of North Korea, information is gleaned mainly from defectors, whose reports suggest that a culture of corruption has infiltrated the entire society. Bribery, notes Lankov (2013), has become a matter of basic survival, given the country's food shortages, lack of basic resources, and harsh penalties for any actions that might be defined as threatening the governing regime. Somalia has comparable problems, with the addition of even more high-level corruption involving patronage and the misappropriation of public funds.

THE FUTURE OF AUTHORITARIAN RULE

As we saw in the last chapter, the reach of democracy has expanded over time, and the reach of authoritarianism has contracted. Even just since 1980, the number of democracies has nearly tripled while the number of autocracies has fallen in tandem. Authoritarianism has proved resilient, though. Nearly one-third of the countries in the world were still classified in the 2022 Democracy Index as authoritarian regimes, about the same number as were classified as Not Free by Freedom House. If we look at the division in terms of population, though, we find that about half of all humans live in democracies and about half live under hybrid or authoritarian rule (see Figure 5.5). We also find that the number of people living under hybrid or authoritarian rule has recently increased, thanks mainly to overall regional declines in Latin America and in parts of Asia.

What is happening here, and where are we headed? What, if anything, can we do to resist authoritarianism? (See *Exploring Problems 5*.) There is no clear answer to these questions, the explanation for democratic backsliding and the growth of authoritarianism varying from one country to another and coming out of different circumstances. (It should also be remembered that while some countries are becoming more authoritarian, others have been performing better: among those whose rankings in the Democracy Index have improved in recent years are Angola, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, and Senegal.)

Overall trends post-Covid were summarized by the Democracy Index for 2022 (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023) as follows:

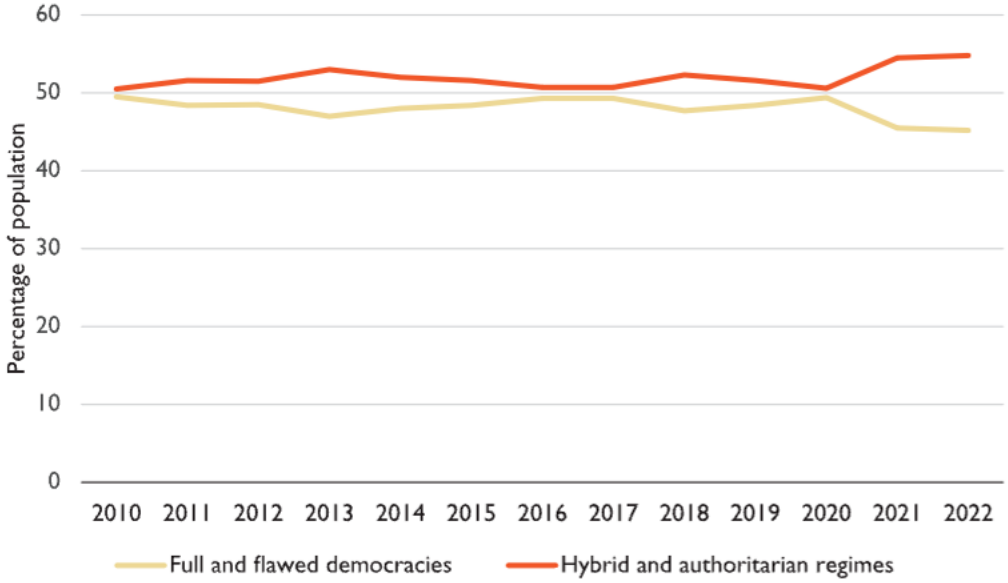


Figure 5.5 The population of democratic and authoritarian regimes

Source: Based on Economist Intelligence Unit (various years).

- There had been a stagnation in global average scores, a 'dismal result' given that much of the world had moved on from the limitations imposed as a result of the Covid-19 lockdown. Some countries had improved their scores, but more than half either stagnated or declined, a problem that hid what it described as 'darker developments'; notable among these were deepening of authoritarianism in China and Russia. China had maintained its 'repressive approach to all manifestations of dissent', while Russia had the biggest decline of any country in the world, its score falling from 3.24 to 2.28 as Vladimir Putin continued to construct a political system with 'many of the features of a dictatorship'.
- It noted that Latin America and the Caribbean had experienced its seventh consecutive year of decline, driven by problems in Haiti, El Salvador, and Mexico. While it still had the highest overall democracy score outside Western Europe and North America, though, there were just three full democracies in the region (Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay), and 12 hybrids or authoritarian regimes. Hyper-polarization and weak state capacity were common problems.
- Asia and Oceania's score remain unchanged, with a move away from a deterioration in the quality of governance and civil liberties. While authoritarianism was not unusual in the region – Afghanistan, Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, North Korea, and Vietnam were among the notable examples – a worrying trend was the worsening of the degree of authoritarian control in many of these cases.

- Weak institutions continued to be a drag on the quality of democracy in Eastern Europe, the post-Cold War transition to democracy remaining incomplete: there were still no full democracies in the area, but eight countries (including Belarus, the post-Soviet republics of central Asia, and Russia) remained authoritarian.
- Problems continued in sub-Saharan Africa, which still has the largest cluster of hybrid regimes (one-third of all countries in the region) and of authoritarian regimes (half the countries in the region). The democratic retreat continued in West Africa as several countries (including Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, and Mali) witnessed successful military coups. Citizens, though, had 'shown a commitment to take part in demonstrations', and demand for democracy remained high, with citizens 'increasingly holding their leaders to account, driven by a combination of young populations, sustained socioeconomic challenges and ethnically driven politics'.
- The Middle East and North Africa, where 17 of the 20 states are classified as authoritarian, remained the lowest ranked of all regions in the index. The average score was weighed down by conflict and instability in countries such as Syria and Yemen, and by democratic regressions in Israel, Kuwait, and Tunisia.

Overall, there is little sign of an improvement in the political situation in most hybrid and authoritarian regimes. Sudden and sustainable improvements rarely happen, and the remarkable records of democratization witnessed in Italy, Japan, and Germany after World War II are unlikely to be repeated in today's most authoritarian regimes. This is because in all three of those cases, the existing authoritarian regime was heavily defeated in war, the circumstances that created or sustained the old system were almost completely eliminated, and the transition to democracy was overseen by victors in the war who had the authority and the power to demand change. More recent efforts to impose democracy through invasion – such as in Afghanistan and Iraq – have failed in part because all or most of these conditions have been missing.

At the end of the day, the biggest problem we face in understanding and resisting authoritarianism and its likely future stems from how little it has been studied, and how often our assumptions about authoritarian regimes are clouded by stereotypes. In their study of dictatorships, Geddes et al. (2018) note how most academic analyses of how governments work have focused on democratic regimes, and that while much has been written about individual autocracies, few comparative studies have been undertaken. Studying authoritarian regimes, they note, presents multiple challenges, including the inherent secrecy of dictatorial decision-making, the informality of much of that decision-making, the scarcity

EXPLORING PROBLEMS 5

HOW CAN WE CONTAIN AUTHORITARIANISM?

The story is often told that following the convention that drew up the new constitution of the United States, Benjamin Franklin – one of the authors – was approached by a group of citizens and asked what sort of government the convention had created. His reported reply was 'A republic, if you can keep it'. The point here is that democracy is hard to achieve, and perhaps even harder to sustain. The further implication is that authoritarianism is hard to resist or overturn, and that perhaps the natural inclination of those in power is to accumulate more power and to forget the interests of ordinary citizens. Or, judging by recent support for democratic leaders with an autocratic tendency (as in Brazil, Hungary, the Philippines, and the United States), that many citizens are willing to compromise their democratic principles for supposed strong leadership.

The only people who are likely to defend and enjoy authoritarian government are those who benefit from it (usually a small and privileged minority), or those who consider it to be a short-term answer to addressing the problems of a community or a state. The default preference for the majority of humanity, meanwhile, is the kind of equality, choice, responsibility, and transparency that comes – in theory, at least – with democracy. How, then, can authoritarianism be resisted or defeated?

As we saw in *Using Theory 5*, the root causes of authoritarian government may not always be well understood, but the methods by which they rule are relatively clear: they include repression, intimidation, corruption, coercion, and co-option. The starting point for resisting authoritarianism, then, is to understand these methods and to respond accordingly. In terms of understanding how best to remove an authoritarian government, the long-held assumption was that authoritarian leaders chose to step down in order to prevent revolution or factional violence. In his study of the end of authoritarian rule, however, which looks at cases dating back to 1800, Treisman (2017) contends that deliberate choice accounted for only about one-third of cases, and that in two-thirds of cases the end came accidentally: leaders weakened their hold on power by making mistakes, such as calling elections, starting military conflicts (that they then lost), ignoring popular unrest, or initiating reforms over which they lost control.

Leaving matters to accidents, though, is a risky strategy, and the best channel for accelerating the process of change – argue Stephan and Snyder (2017) – is to deny dictators or autocrats the most important source of their power, which is the consent of large numbers of people. The best way to do that, in turn, is through non-violent civil resistance. History, they contend, has shown that the use of petitions, boycotts, strikes, and other forms of resistance is far more effective at slowing, disrupting, or even halting authoritarianism than armed resistance. Consider these questions:

- What do the causes of authoritarianism tell us about the best ways of resisting it?
- Are collective defiance and stubbornness enough?
- Can oppression and violence only be met by violence?

of reliable data on the work of authoritarian governments, and the sheer variety of the forms taken by authoritarian regimes. They might also have added that it is often more dangerous to undertake field research in dictatorships, and harder to interview citizens who might face retribution for sharing their honest views about their governments. For all these reasons, it is hard to be sure what the future holds for authoritarian regimes.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What are the key differences between hybrid and authoritarian regimes?
- How does patronage differ in its democratic and authoritarian forms?
- Even if personalism is usually associated with authoritarian regimes, could it also be a useful tool for helping us understand and describe government in democracies?
- What is the line between ruling parties in authoritarian regimes and dominant parties in democracies?
- Why are military governments so much more unusual today than they once were?
- Why are so many authoritarian regimes corrupt?

KEY CONCEPTS

- Absolute monarchy
- Authoritarian regime
- Authoritarianism
- Autocracy
- Autocratization
- Coercion
- Coup d'état
- Corruption
- Cult of personality
- Despotism
- Dictatorship
- Divine right
- Hybrid regime
- Military rule
- Patronage
- Personalism
- Presidential monarchy
- Ruling party
- Totalitarianism

FURTHER READING

Brooker, Paul (2014) *Non-Democratic Regimes*, 3rd edn (Palgrave). An assessment of the different types of non-democratic regime, how they emerge, the means they use, and how they survive.

Frantz, Erica (2018) *Authoritarianism: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press). An assessment of the characteristics, background, qualities, and possible future of authoritarianism.

Geddes, Barbara, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz (2018) *How Dictatorships Work: Power, Personalization, and Collapse* (Cambridge University Press). A comparative study of how dictators win, keep and lose power, using data from about 200 dictatorial regimes.

Heywood, Paul M. (ed.) (2015) *Routledge Handbook of Political Corruption* (Routledge). A review of the meaning and causes of corruption, with chapters offering cases from different parts of the world.

Larres, Klaus (ed.) (2022) *Dictators and Autocrats: Securing Power Across Global Politics* (Routledge). An edited collection of studies of autocrats, ranging from historical figures such as Hitler to a wide selection of more recent cases, from Vladimir Putin to Kim Jong-Un, the Assad dynasty, and Donald Trump.

Márquez, Xavier (2017) *Non-Democratic Politics: Authoritarianism, Dictatorship and Democratization* (Palgrave). A comprehensive analysis of the main types of authoritarian regime and the means by which authoritarian governments wield and retain power.

Svolik, Milan W. (2012) *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge University Press). Another comparative survey of the causes, methods, and strategies of dictatorship, explaining why it takes different forms in different situations.

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SPOTLIGHT 5
CHINA

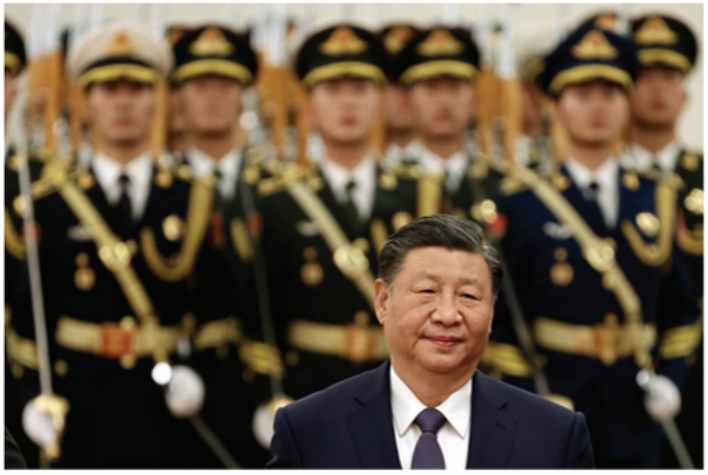
PROFILE

China is the world's second largest state by population and by economic output, and has been undergoing a process of political and economic change which is changing the global order. It has one of the world's oldest cultures, but is normally reviewed only in terms of the changes it has seen since the institution of communist rule in 1949. Until 1976 it was under the idiosyncratic and hard-line control of Mao Zedong, since when several generations of leaders have overseen pro-market changes that have helped China become the world's fastest-growing economy. Political reform has not moved as quickly, however, and China remains under the watchful control of the Chinese Communist Party. Dissent and opposition are controlled and limited, corruption is a persistent problem, China's human rights record is poor, and in spite of the changes it has undergone, it sits low on most comparative political and economic rankings.

Form of government	Unitary communist republic. State formed 1949, and most recent constitution adopted 1982.
Executive	The once mainly ceremonial role of president has been transformed recently into a powerful executive position, the previous limit of two five-year terms removed in 2018 and replaced with a lifetime tenure. The position of general secretary of the CCP is also powerful, while the State Council, headed by the premier, supervises the work of government ministries.
Legislature	Unicameral National People's Congress of nearly 3,000 members, chosen indirectly through local and provincial congresses, serving five-year terms. Meets only for brief periods, its work carried out when in recess by a 150-member Standing Committee.
Judiciary	No independent constitutional court. Rule through law has strengthened but the judicial system remains underdeveloped.
Electoral system	Elections have been introduced to many of China's villages and to some townships. However, elected officials still operate under the party's supervision. Indirect election is usual at higher levels.
Parties	One-party. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) remains the dominant political force, its leadership being a parallel government within which most real power is focused.
Population	1,412 million
Gross Domestic Product	$17,960 billion
Per capita GDP	$12,720
Democracy Index rating	Authoritarian
Freedom House rating	Not Free
Corruption score	42/100
Human Development Index rating	High

CASE STUDY: AUTHORITARIAN RULE IN CHINA

China is an authoritarian regime within which the degree of central government control has waxed and waned according mainly to the preferences and political skills of its leaders. During the era of Mao Zedong, it veered between totalitarianism and chaos, but his successors began a process that saw China moving towards new openness both in its politics and its economic policy. That process has been undermined (or reshaped) in recent years thanks to the efforts of Xi Jinping, who has been president since 2013.



Pool / Pool

President Xi Jinping reviews a guard of honour in Beijing, his central role in public life illustrating the increased authoritarianism of the Chinese political system.

Although government continues to be dominated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Xi was able to convince the party in 2018 to convert the position of president into a job for life, and has since tightened his control. He has even been able to integrate 'Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era' into the Chinese constitution. This philosophy has been summarized by Buckley (2018) as a 'great rejuvenation' for China in the world (through its economic and military power), revitalized control of the CCP over society, and a central role for Xi in Chinese leadership.

The depth of political control witnessed in China can be ascribed mainly to the skills of the CCP in both maintaining its monopoly position while also becoming less intrusive and more supervisory. In local communities, informal networks of power-holders now determine 'who gets rich first' in a political market rather than a free market. These alliances are composed not only of well-placed party members, but also of officials in the bureaucracy, local government, and the army. Local officials provide favoured businesses (including their own) with contracts, land, sympathetic regulations, information, supplies, transport, and other subsidies.

While China creates an impression of political stability and economic growth, the reality is less positive: economic cleavages have widened, the entrenched interests of the CCP have deepened, and the collective governance of the past is trending towards one-man rule. Uncertainty hangs in the air, raising many troubling questions about the new directions being taken by the world's second biggest country.

Further reading

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6

Political culture

CONTENTS

- Understanding political culture
- Elite culture and identity politics
- From *The Civic Culture* to populism
- Political trust
- Political culture in authoritarian regimes

PREVIEW

Political culture describes the relationship that communities (such as states) have with politics and government: what members of these communities expect of government, what they regard as normal and abnormal in terms of the behaviour of government, and how they define the purposes of government. Pinning down the features of political culture gives us important insights into the personality of government and politics in its many varieties, and yet it can be hard to measure, and is barely studied at all in relation to most authoritarian regimes. Also, it is essential to remember that while we can list some of the core ideas and values associated with political culture as a whole, different groups within political communities will often have different political cultures.

This chapter begins with an outline of the general features of political culture, and the challenges posed by the gaps between theory and practice. It then looks at the critical differences between elite culture, multiculturalism, and identity politics before contrasting the idea of civic culture (a particular form of political culture based on an acceptance of the authority of the state and a belief in civic participation) with the growing influence of populist ideas. The chapter goes on to look at the causes and effects of the decline in political trust in government, which has contributed a redefinition of political culture. Finally, it looks at the particular challenges of understanding political culture in authoritarian regimes, where it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between indigenous and imported political values.

HIGHLIGHTS

- The concept of political culture is important, but we also need to be aware of the difficulties of generalizing and measuring its features, which are both changeable and complex.
- What is thought of as political culture is in fact often elite political culture, and it is critical not to lose sight of the multiple sub-cultures that exist in many communities.
- Multiculturalism, identity politics, and globalization have all had important influences on how we measure and define political culture.
- The idea of civic culture is used as the reference point for our understanding of how political culture evolves.
- Political trust has been decaying in many democracies, but at different rates and for different reasons.
- Much of the evidence suggests that there is more support in authoritarian regimes for strong leaders than for freedom and self-expression.

UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL CULTURE

In October 2012, Julia Gillard – then just over two years into her term as the first woman to serve as prime minister of Australia – stood up in the Australian parliament to comment during a debate. Her speech soon evolved into an impromptu exposition on sexism and misogyny, coming on the back of months of personal attacks on the prime minister, including comments that she was unmarried and childless, and the circulation of degrading images of her on social media. Her comments were directed mainly at the incumbent leader of the opposition, Tony Abbott, who had asked in a media interview why it was so bad that men had more political power than women, and had argued that men were more suited by physiology or temperament to exercise authority. (Abbott was to briefly serve as prime minister himself in 2013–15.)

The speech quickly captured news headlines, and more than a decade later was being described as having made points that still resonated because of the 'toxic sexist culture' that continued to be found inside the bubble of Australian politics. Williams (2020) noted that the problem was far from unique to Australia, and that government had 'long been a space made for and by men, privileging masculinity while marginalizing everyone else'. Australia, though, he argued, was behind its developed peers in addressing the problem, the implication being that sexism could reasonably be considered a defining element of political culture in the country (see also Collier and Raney, 2018).

Before extrapolating too much from this example of **political culture**, it is critical to note that such behaviour is far from acceptable to most Australians. In fact, this example illustrates one of the four key features of political culture summarized in Figure 6.1: that there is a limit to what we can describe as national political culture, and that while it is easy and tempting to assume that what we see or hear about politics in a given country reflects the wider political culture of that country, we might be wrong.

Political culture: The sum of individual and group values, beliefs, attitudes, norms, and expectations regarding politics and government.

Most of the citizens of democracies, for example, would say that they believe in civic duty, equality, representative government, and the rule of law. However, we should bear in mind that attitudes and expectations about what these ideas mean in practice differ across populations. This is illustrated in the United States

Feature	*Qualities*
Limits	Not always generalizable, and difficult to apply its features more widely to a given community.
Measurement	Not always easy to identify or quantify.
Changeability	Culture is not static, and changes with time and place.
Complexity	Multiple cultures are more likely to exist than universal cultures.

Figure 6.1 Features of political culture

with the question of the extent to which people think that government should be responsible for providing services such as welfare. About half of Americans support the idea, but the differences of opinion – by age, gender, ethnicity, and ideology – are sufficiently large (see Figure 6.2) as to issue a clear warning about the dangers of making too many generalizations about American political culture. The United States is often described as a country that places a premium on self-reliance, but the data in this graph suggest that it is mainly more conservative, older, male, and white Americans who subscribe to this view.

A second point to bear in mind about political culture is that it can be hard to measure. We can contrast it with political ideology, which – as we will see in Chapter 15 – refers to the ideas that people hold about the role of government and the goals of public policy. While ideology influences what individuals think about different leaders, candidates, parties, and policies, and can be measured in opinion polls and election results, political culture is less easily measurable. This is partly because not all societies are as open as others, and partly because political culture comes close to Linz's notion (2000) of 'mentalities', which he defines as 'ways of thinking and feeling, more emotional than rational, that provide non-codified ways of reacting to different situations'.

A third point to bear in mind is that attitudes and expectations change over time. Political culture is far from a static concept, and it can both influence and be influenced by broader changes in the way societies approach government and politics. For decades, for example, racism and sexism were such a normal part of the political culture of the older democracies that they were rarely even thought about, and were supported and perpetrated both by political culture and law. Recent polling in Europe and North America has found that people have become much more aware of racism and sexism and more supportive of

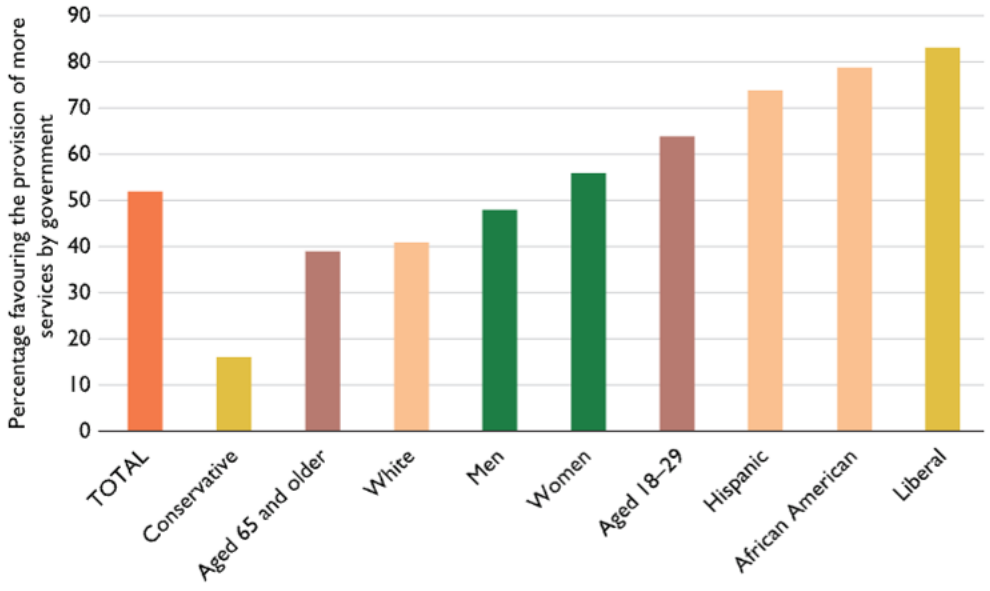

Figure 6.2 Views about government services in the United States

Source: Based on Pew Research Center (2020a).

efforts to address both problems, even if they might remain unclear about their root causes and the most effective solutions.

Despite the challenges posed by understanding political culture, and the varied depth of research into the topic (some countries – mainly democracies – are far better understood than others), it is a critical part of understanding the differences and similarities among political communities. It sheds important light on the logic behind the structure of political institutions, the values that lie at the foundation of constitutions, and the different patterns of political participation that we find in different parts of the world. For all these reasons, political culture is key to appreciating the context within which politics and government function.

ELITE CULTURE AND IDENTITY POLITICS

The fourth and most important point to appreciate about political culture is that societies are so complex, and often so large that, instead of there being unified political cultures, there is more likely to be either a national political culture with one or more sub-cultures, or even simply multiple different regional or sectional cultures. Much of what we associate with a given society – particularly in authoritarian regimes – is actually **elite political culture**, which is often different from the values and expectations of the population at large. (See Chapter 4 and *Using Theory 9* for more on the nature of elites and elitism.) In such instances, much of what we associate with a state or a society is less what we see through the words and deeds of ordinary people than how it is represented through the words and deeds of an **elite**, including elected officials, bureaucrats, media owners, and business leaders.

Elite political culture: The political norms and expectations held by those closest to the centres of political power.

Elite: A group of people with a privileged position in society, based on a combination of factors such as education, wealth, social class, and age.

One example of the elite role in defining norms and expectations is found in the work of the European Union. In the post-war construction of a united Europe from the ashes of a shattered continent, it was mainly heads of government and their bureaucrats who took the initiatives, wrote the rules, and shaped the policies. Without their sustained commitment, this achievement would probably have been impossible. It was a triumph not only of interests, but also of the will of a particular generation of European leaders. Ordinary people have since come to play a much greater role in defining the political culture of the EU, but critics still often charge the EU with being a club run by elites, whose interests are promoted at the costs of the general population. This anti-elitist sentiment was one of the motivations behind the support given by many people in the UK to the Brexit vote in 2016.

Another case of elite political culture is found in Japan, where political power has long been based on notions of group identity (Hendry, 2019). This is reflected in ideas about loyalty, obligation, and hierarchy, with a web of social and financial ties binding a small political elite together and promoting nepotism and factionalism. It is reflected in the way that workers tend to stay with one company all their lives, in the persistence of factions within political parties, and in the frequency of influence peddling in politics. The emphasis on status and rank means that all people are made aware of their position in the group, that

JOHN THYS / Contributor

A meeting of the European Council, one of the administrative bodies of the European Union. There is a widely-held perception in the EU that it has been a construct of elites, with too little input from ordinary Europeans.

a premium is placed on allegiance to the group, and that criticism from below is discouraged as a threat to group harmony (McCargo, 2012). These values, though, have been increasingly criticized for acting as a brake on Japan's political modernization, for interfering with the free exchange of ideas, and for contributing to complacency and conservatism in the management of the country's largest corporations.

Multiculturalism: The existence of multiple cultural or ethnic groups within a society.

The absence of a dominant national political culture is sometimes reflected in the extent to which some societies experience and encourage **multiculturalism**. As we saw in Chapter 3, few states are entirely or even mainly homogenous, and most consist of multiple cultural, national, or ethnic groups. The extent to which these groups have learned to live with one another varies, but in few cases have matters worked out well. This has prompted the political leaders of Britain, France, and Germany at various times to declare the failure of multiculturalism. Meanwhile, several of the other Spotlight cases used in this book – notably the United States, South Africa, and Nigeria – are deeply divided, struggling with domestic cultural, political, and social tensions that complicate the definition of their political cultures.

Few countries illustrate the pressures of diversity on political culture quite as clearly as India, where the remarkable variety of political, economic, and social differences (see Mitra, 2017) make it more correct to talk of multiple Indian political cultures than of a single national political culture. Consider the following:

- It contains regions with long but separate histories.
- Its southern and western states are mainly better off economically than those in the north and the east.
- Levels of poverty range widely, as do patterns of social development.

- Society is divided into a complex system of castes based originally on profession (priests were distinguished from warriors, farmers, and labourers, for example), and which persists despite efforts to weaken its hold.
- There is a clear urban–rural divide, with millions of Indians still living a simple village life while millions more congregate in fast-growing cities, some (such as Mumbai and Delhi) with strong international connections.
- More than 1,000 languages are spoken in India, with 18 considered national languages.
- Although 80 per cent of Indians are Hindu, 13 per cent are Muslim, and the balance follow minority religions. Religious tensions have deepened in recent years with the rise of Hindu nationalism; see *Spotlight 4* on India in Chapter 4.

New challenges to the idea of a dominant national political culture have been posed by two developments. The first of these, which is helping encourage societies to give more recognition to diversity, is **identity politics**. This is an effort by different groups to have their perspectives better acknowledged and understood. Accelerating in the closing decades of the last century, identity politics brought new attention to the interests of women, the LGBTQ+ community, ethnic minorities, and even different generations. The list of possibilities is extensive, the main point of commonality being that the members of such groups feel vulnerable to oppression, exclusion, or discrimination as a result of their membership of that group, and – by identifying together – are encouraged to raise awareness of their situation.

Identity politics: Political positions and values based on association with a particular identity, such as gender, age, ethnicity, religion, disability, or sexual orientation.

At the same time, and particularly in the context of the kind of populist nationalism discussed in Chapter 3, there is a danger of identity politics being used as a divisive tool by members of the perceived dominant culture pitting other groups and cultures against one another. Race has long been a factor in political debates in numerous countries (even while many argue that is a social construct rather than a physical reality), being one of the core explanations behind discrimination and inequality. The rise of Black Lives Matter – born in the United States in 2013 as a protest against racially motivated violence against African Americans – has drawn attention to racial discrimination in many countries, and the extent to which such discrimination is often built into the structure of political systems. It has also helped shed new light on white supremacy in many countries, and has sparked divisive debates about the relationship between race and politics.

Another of the effects of identity politics has been to pose new questions about the differences within national political cultures. Consider the example of the political breakthroughs being made by women in many societies, prompting several questions from Paxton et al. (2021):

- Are women in power more likely to see women constituents as a distinctive group?
- Do women and men prioritize different policy issues?
- To what extent can we say that some policy issues – such as domestic violence or abortion – are more distinctly women's rather than men's issues?
- Are women in power taking the initiative to act on behalf of women?

- Do women have a different political style from men, and are they changing the rules of the political game?

The second source of challenges to the idea of a dominant national political culture is globalization. This has influenced political cultures by building international connections, promoting interdependence, emphasizing the problems and needs that different communities have in common, and heightening the sense of a shared humanity. At the same time, Parekh (2008) argues that it has challenged traditional ethnic, cultural, and religious identities:

> [The state] is subject to unprecedented pressures from above and below, raising acute questions about the nature and basis of the national identity on which it traditionally relied to maintain its unity and stability. Cultural communities are constantly exposed to, and having to change in response to, each other, and can no longer define and maintain their identities as they did before.

In summary, then, political culture can be defined and understood in many different ways, and is subject to many different pressures. This makes it difficult always to be sure of the extent to which some of the norms, values, and expectations we see in different political communities apply more generally within those communities (see *Using Theory 6*). Part of the problem, as we will now see, is that research into political culture is relatively new, dating back no more than a few decades, as a result of which most of the debates about its meaning and impact are still being formed.

FROM *THE CIVIC CULTURE* TO POPULISM

The role of political culture in political science generally, and in comparative politics more specifically, has undergone a rollercoaster ride in recent decades as we have learned more about differences in attitudes towards government and politics. Everyone agrees, argues Wiarda (2014), that political culture is important in terms of understanding different countries and regions, but there has long been disagreement about the extent of the differences, and about how precisely to measure their effect. Studies of political culture were long criticized for being impressionistic and for engaging in stereotyping, and were often rejected for the problems inherent in quantifying the concept. Starting in the 1960s, though, the study of political culture became more methodical and empirically based, and underwent a revival that has since made it, in Wiarda's view, one of the leading explanatory paradigms in political science, along with institutionalism (see Chapter 7) and structuralism (see Chapter 10).

Civic culture: A moderate political culture in which most people accept the obligation to participate in politics while acknowledging the authority of the state and its right to take decisions.

Much of the change can be dated from the publication in 1963 of *The Civic Culture*, a study written by the American political scientists Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba. Their investigation was the first systematic study of political culture, using large-scale public opinion surveys for the first time, and trying to discover what people *actually* thought rather than what other people thought they thought. In seeking to identify the culture within which democracy was most likely to develop and consolidate, they identified what they called a **civic culture**. This is

USING THEORY 6

CULTURAL THEORY

Cultural theory: A collective term to describe approaches to understanding the dynamics of culture and its relationship to politics, society, the media, and economics, for example.

The relationship between culture and politics has long been a point of interest for political analysts, with questions asked about how cultural norms and practices support or challenge different political preferences and forms. The challenge, though, has always been (and remains) how to define culture, a term that is typically used in an anthropological or sociological context to describe a community of people with a shared history and common values, beliefs, and customs. More broadly, culture describes a set of assumptions associated with an institution or a society: a model of how it works, of what is considered normal or abnormal, and of the goals that are worth pursuing. Ross (2009) makes a distinction between culture as 'a system of meaning that people use to manage their daily worlds' and culture as 'the basis of social and political identity that affects how people line up and how they act on a wide range of matters'.

The earliest use of cultural theory to understand politics focused on an assessment of how cultural practices either sustained or undermined different political forms. More recently, and particularly in Europe, there has been a vigorous debate about multiculturalism and its impact on states whose populations have become increasingly diverse in the wake of immigration. As we saw in Chapter 3, while many welcome the benefits that immigrants bring to society, others do not, and there has been a backlash that has fed into the rise of nationalist movements and support for political parties that oppose immigration, notably in France, Britain, and Germany.

The troubled European record can be compared and contrasted with that of Canada, which has made a concerted political effort dating back decades to define, recognize, and build on its multicultural identity. The 1988 Canadian Multiculturalism Act acknowledges that 'multiculturalism reflects the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society and acknowledges the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage'. In the United States, meanwhile, which makes much of its immigrant history, racial differences are discussed more forthrightly than cultural differences, and there has been a backlash in some quarters against immigrants that parallels the European experience.

Culture is also a factor in contrasting global perspectives on politics and government. We saw in Chapter 2 the concerns raised about the close association between political theory (on the one hand) and Western ideas (on the other), which has been partly a consequence of the much bigger body of scholarship and analysis produced by Western political scientists. This is reflected in the research for this book, which is based in part on drawing examples from the 18 Spotlight states. Among those cases (chosen for their political and geographical variety), it is easiest to find research published in English on political culture in the United States, the European Union, Britain, Germany, Russia, and China. Decades after the era of decolonization, however, it remains more difficult to find research on political culture in cases such as Mexico, Brazil, India, South Africa, and Nigeria.

a particular form of allegiant political culture in which most citizens accept the authority of the state and believe in civic participation, and includes an expectation of fair treatment by government, the ability to talk freely about politics, tolerance towards opposition, and civic cooperation and trust.

It is tempting to define a healthy political system as one whose citizens believe they can contribute to, and are affected by, government decisions. However, Almond and Verba rejected this proposition, arguing instead that the ideal conditions for democracy emerge when a participant culture is balanced by low levels of participation; citizens are not constantly involved in politics, but have the potential to act if needed. Armed with this theory, and with sample surveys in Britain, Italy, Mexico, the United States, and what was then West Germany, they found that Britain, and to a lesser extent the United States, came closest to the civic ideal. In both countries, citizens felt that they could influence the government but often chose not to do so. By contrast, the political cultures of Italy, Mexico, and West Germany all deviated in different ways from the ideal. (For a more recent assessment, see *Spotlight 6* on Germany at the end of this chapter.)

Like most original research, Almond and Verba's study attracted its share of critics, some highlighting limitations in the concept of political culture itself while others pointed to the problems inherent in the small number of cases and the Anglo-American bias of the results. The world was also just about to be shaken by a series of events – including student activism, oil crises, financial crises, separatist movements in some, environmental and feminist movements in others, interspersed with phases of growth and unparalleled prosperity – that sparked a rethinking of the features of political culture in democratic regimes. In the early 1970s, the American social scientist Ronald Inglehart coined the term **post-materialism** to distinguish the old materialist interest in economic growth and security from the new focus on quality-of-life issues such as environmental protection, nuclear disarmament, gender equality, and freedom of expression.

Post-materialism: A set of values emphasizing the quality of life over materialist values such as economic growth and physical security.

According to Inglehart (1971), this unique combination of affluence, peace, and security led to a 'silent revolution' in Western political cultures. Based on extensive survey evidence, Inglehart concluded that the more affluent a democracy, the higher the proportion of post-materialists within its borders. In Europe, for example, post-materialism came first to the wealthiest democracies such as the Netherlands, West Germany, and the Scandinavian countries, where it also made the deepest inroads. Post-materialism was less common in poorer European democracies with lower levels of education, such as Greece (Knutsen, 1996).

When Inglehart began his studies in the early 1970s, materialists outnumbered post-materialists by about four to one in many Western countries. By 2000, the two groups were more even in size, a change that represented a major transformation in political culture. The spread of post-material values was promoted more widely by globalization and the expansion of education, with experience of higher education (especially in the arts and social sciences) being the single best predictor of a post-material outlook. In France, surveys conducted between 2005 and 2008 showed that 56 per cent of those with at least some university education were post-materialists, compared with only 25 per cent among those with lower educational achievement (Dalton, 2020).

Interest in the idea of civic culture has evolved as research on political culture has been completed in a wider variety of situations. In 2014, a new study titled *The Civic Culture Transformed* (Dalton and Welzel) was published that reflected on the impact of post-materialism on our understanding of civic culture, while also pointing out that there was by then much more data available on different country cases, looking at values and expectations across time. The core argument made by its authors was that citizens had turned away from the kind of allegiant view identified by Almond and Verba and had become more distrustful of electoral politics, institutions, and political representatives, and more willing to confront elites.

Some years earlier, Ignazi (1992) had pointed out that the idea of post-materialism had been based on a study of value change on the left of the political spectrum, mainly overlooking developments on the right. Once those developments were added to the picture, he argued, and particularly once the rise of extreme or radical right-wing political parties was considered, it was clear that a 'silent counter-revolution' was emerging. The core ideology of these parties and their followers, concluded Mudde (2002), was xenophobic nationalism: a 'fear the other' (specifically, a dislike of immigrants) combined with a view that the interests of their home state should take priority and be protected from foreign influences and international compromises. They were also law and order parties that supported harsher law enforcement and the imposition of penalties as a means of reducing crime, and supported the idea of welfare chauvinism, meaning that benefits should be restricted to certain groups, notably the citizens of a country as opposed to immigrants.

Tied into the idea of the silent counter-revolution (and contrasting with the idea of the allegiant civic culture) has been the rise of **populism**, a range of political positions that contrasts 'the people' as a moral silent majority with 'the elite'. The latter are portrayed as an establishment of politicians and their followers who pursue their own narrow and self-serving political, economic, and cultural interests. Most versions of populism are associated with the political right, but some are associated with the political left. The degree of success of populist parties and leaders has varied from one country to another in Europe, attracting their most support in Hungary, France, Poland, Italy, Sweden, and Spain (see Figure 6.3), as well as becoming part of government in Austria, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, and Switzerland. Populist ideas have also attracted new support outside Europe in the elections to office of – among others – Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines in 2016, Donald Trump in the United States the same year, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil in 2019.

Populism: A political programme or movement based on championing the rights and interests of the people in the face of the ruling elite.

Support for populist ideas is particularly strong in Hungary, much to the dismay of many in its European Union partner states. Like many of its neighbours, Hungary seemed to be on the path to democracy in the 1990s, a trend that was strengthened when it joined the EU in 2004. Then the Fidesz party came to power in 2010, with Viktor Orbán returning as prime minister. His conservative nationalist policies – including his argument that he is protecting Hungary from the threat posed to its Christian culture by Muslim immigration and LGBTQ+ rights – has appealed to older and rural Hungarians, allowing Fidesz to win four straight elections, and allowing Orbán to accumulate unprecedented levels of power in the office of prime minister.

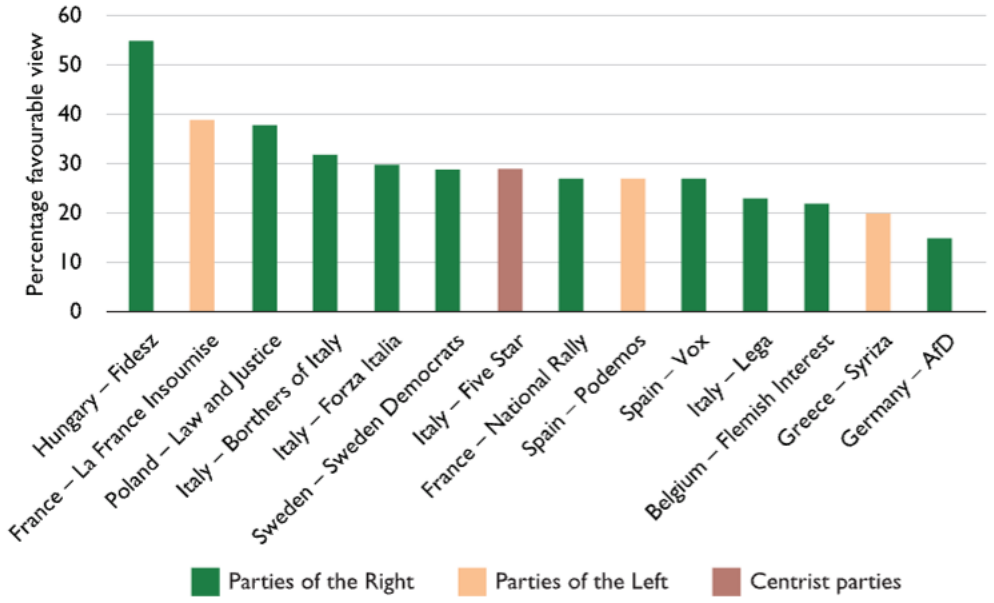

Figure 6.3 Support for populist parties in Europe

Source: Pew Research Center (2022a). Note: These are not election results.

We need to be wary of applying arguments about threats to civic culture and the rise of populism too widely, as reflected in Figure 6.4 in the findings of a study into the quality of life carried out in 2017 by the US-based Pew Research Center, a body that has generated much valuable comparative survey research on political values and attitudes. True, the survey was carried out well before Covid-19, and there has been no updated survey since then, but even a glance at the results is enough to reveal that there is little correlation between rich countries and poor countries, or democratic and authoritarian regimes. For example, the

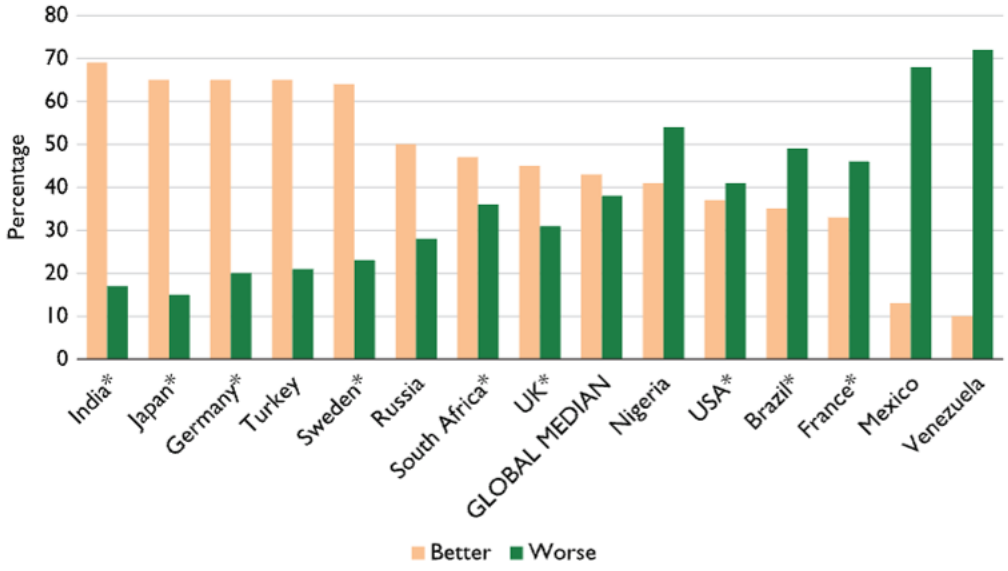

Figure 6.4 Is life better or worse than 50 years ago?

Source: Based on Pew Research Center (2017). Responses to statement 'Life in our country today is _____ than it was 50 years ago for people like me.'

** Full or flawed democracies.*

group of countries where large majorities felt that life was better included two wealthy and politically stable democracies (Germany and Sweden), an emerging democracy with widespread poverty (India), and a country whose government had recently turned towards authoritarianism (Turkey). Meanwhile, three countries that were at the time classified as flawed democracies (the United States, Brazil, and France) had more negative results, while the greatest numbers of people who saw life as worse were found in a flawed democracy (Mexico) and an authoritarian system (Venezuela).

In looking at surveys such as these, and reviewing the trend from an allegiant and mainly trusting civic culture to a critical and distrustful populism, we have to be careful to distinguish long-term changes from short-term cycles. Duterte, Trump, and Bolsonaro may all have been populists, for example, but neither Trump nor Bolsonaro was elected to a consecutive second term, and while Duterte was limited by the constitution to one term, his successor Bongbong Marcos came from the same party but was notably traditionalist in his approach to politics. There have also been signs of declining support for right-wing populist parties in several European countries. Most citizens of some countries are still mainly content with their political systems, while in other countries the problem is less with a decline in civic culture than it is with dismay in particular governments or leaders. Broadly, though, as we will see in the next section, trust in government is on the decline.

POLITICAL TRUST

Faith and trust in government has suffered in most of the world in recent decades, a problem made worse in the wake of differences of opinion about political responses to Covid-19. In South Africa in 2021, disgruntlement with Covid policy combined with resistance among his supporters to the arrest of former President Jacob Zuma (in office 2009–18) for ignoring a court order to appear before a commission of inquiry into political corruption. A survey carried out at the time found that trust in a variety of public institutions had fallen to its lowest point in 15 years: about 70 per cent of respondents said they had little or no trust in parliament, political parties, the police, or traditional leaders, only 60 per cent could say the same for the president or the national Electoral Commission, and even religious leaders and courts inspired the trust of only 52 per cent of respondents. It was, noted Moosa and Hofmeyr (2021), a perfect storm of disaffection among allies of Zuma and a population of mainly poor, unemployed, and desperate citizens living within a vacuum of power and leadership.

The South African experience, and that in many other countries in the world, was another sobering reminder of how far we have changed since the 1960s, when Almond and Verba were researching civic culture in the 1960s. It was widely assumed at the time that one of the hallmarks of a successful democratic regime was a high degree of allegiance, marked by **political trust**. This trust existed when there was a belief that government made competent decisions that reflected the concern of leaders for those they governed, and when

Political trust: The belief that rulers are generally well intentioned and effective in serving the interests of the governed.

citizens had a high level of confidence in government to work for the general good of society.

Polling seemed to suggest that levels of trust in the governments of democracies were often high in the early 1960s, with, for example, nearly 80 per cent of Americans trusting their government most or all of the time (see later in this section). The picture has since changed dramatically, with studies since the 1990s finding that levels of political trust have been falling in most parts of the world. At first, it was thought that the problem was one with Western democracies (because this was where most of the research was being done). Later, with surveys across a wider array of countries, it became clear that declining trust was a pervasive problem.

As noted earlier in this chapter, the collection of studies published as *The Civic Culture Transformed* (Dalton and Welzel, 2014) – which took Almond and Verba's work as its base, and looked at multiple countries around the world – argued that attitudes in many countries around the world had moved from allegiance to assertion. This conclusion has been reflected in more recent surveys undertaken by Edelman, a US-based marketing consultancy, which since 2001 has been researching levels of trust in four sets of institutions: government, business, media, and non-governmental organizations. It has found those levels changing according to economic and political circumstances: in 2007, for example, trust in business overtook government and the media, but then trust in business fell after the global financial crisis of 2007–08. Trust in all four institutions reached new lows in 2017, and has never really recovered. The Edelman Trust Barometer has also revealed quite different levels of trust comparatively, as reflected in the data for 2022 shown in Figure 6.5.

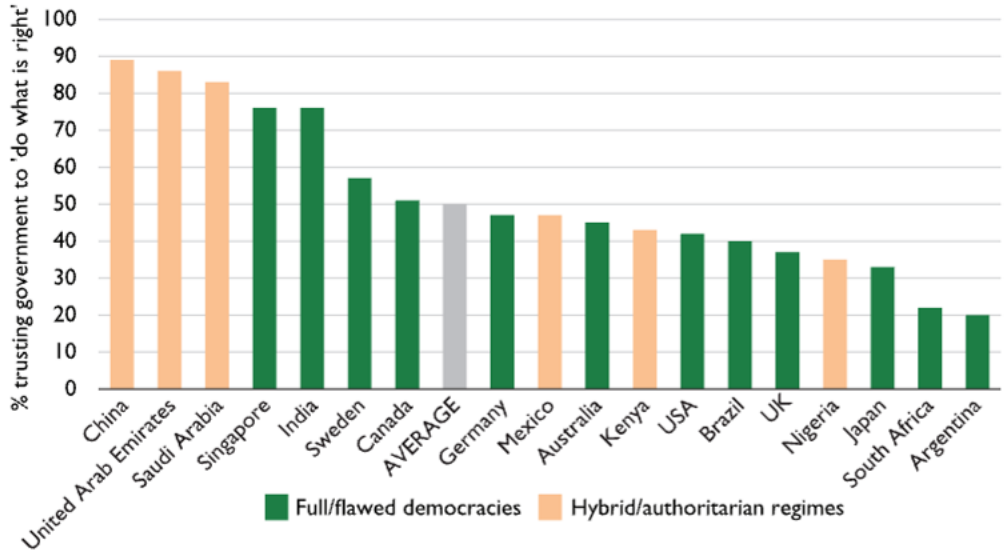

Figure 6.5 Comparing trust in government

Source: Based on Edelman (2023). Based on fieldwork in 2022 in 26 countries. For the latest information, see Edelman Trust Barometer at https://www.edelman.com.

The main findings of its 2023 survey (Edelman, 2023, conducted online in 28 countries) were as follows:

- Economic optimism was collapsing, with most of the countries surveyed seeing all-time lows in the number of people who thought their families would be better off in five years.
- Personal economic fears (such as job security) had been joined by existential societal fears such as climate change, nuclear war, and food shortages.
- Government was generally seen as unethical and incompetent, in contrast to more positive views about business.
- Among institutional leaders, government leaders attracted the lowest levels of trust.
- People in the highest income bracket lived 'in a different trust reality' than those in the lowest income bracket.
- There was low trust in the media, and particularly in social media, and a shared media environment had given way to echo chambers (see Chapter 12) that made it difficult to work collaboratively to solve problems.
- Levels of polarization had grown in most countries, and there were fears in several (such as the United States, South Africa, Sweden, the UK, and Germany) that the divisions could not be overcome.

Such data are helpful and interesting, but it is often left to others to provide the explanations. Are the high levels of trust in China an indication of true faith in the political system, for example, or a reflection of concerns among Chinese citizens about being openly critical of the authoritarian regime in which they live? Nearby Japan, meanwhile, for all its years of stability, comes in surprisingly low; it ranks high on the Democracy Index, *Freedom in the World*, and the Corruption Perceptions Index (see Chapter 5), yet almost two-thirds of Japanese do not trust their government. The low British figure stands in contrast to the strong reputation for trust that Britain enjoyed at the time of *The Civic Culture*, and can be explained in part by the ongoing tensions created by economic inequality. Meanwhile, the low numbers in Brazil, Nigeria, and South Africa are partly a reflection of high levels of corruption in all three countries.

The United States is a notable case for which we have decades of data (see Figure 6.6). In the late 1950s and early 1960s, about three-quarters of Americans felt that they could trust the federal government most or all of the time. By 1980, in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate, that number had fallen to barely one-quarter. It recovered somewhat during the Reagan years (1981–89), fell again as political divisions made themselves more evident, and improved again as Americans rallied around the flag in the wake of the attacks of September 2001. Then, with the intelligence failings exposed by 9/11, mixed opinions about the wisdom of invading Iraq in 2003, and the financial crisis that broke in 2007, trust fell back to new lows from which they have not recovered. The political divisions that mark the US are reflected in the way in which trust in government among Republicans grows during Republican presidencies, and among Democrats during Democratic presidencies.

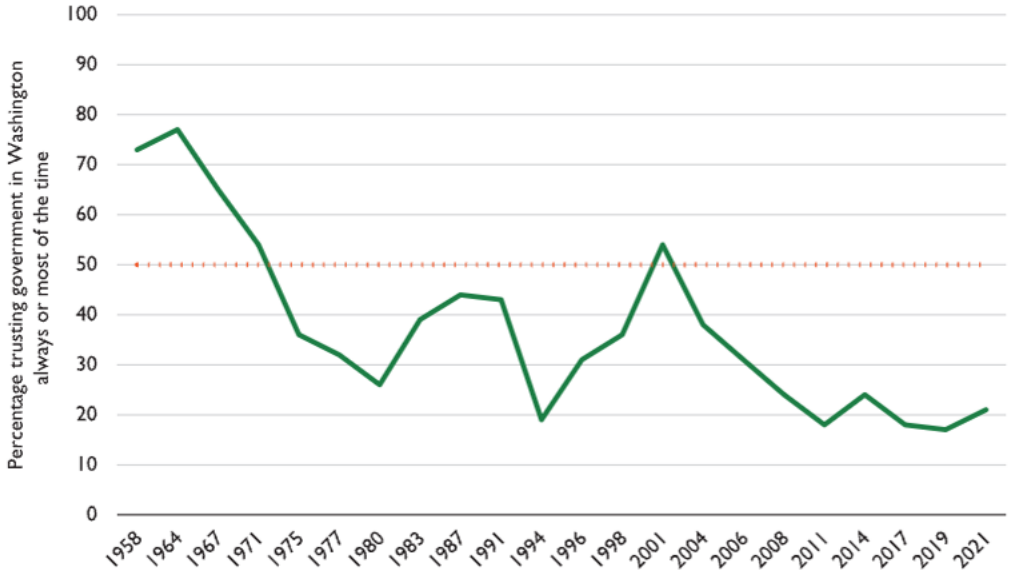

Figure 6.6 Trust in government in the United States

Source: Pew Research Center (2022b).

This problem of declining trust in government takes us far from the assumptions about allegiance made back in the 1960s, and raises many questions about the impact on government and politics of a host of pressures, including technology, social inequalities, globalization, political violence, and the many questions being asked about how the ordering of societies are traditionally seen. The Covid-19 pandemic added many more questions to the mix as governments struggled to agree and implement workable responses to the virus, and to manage the distribution of vaccines.

While the Pew Research Center has not yet replicated its 2017 survey on whether life was better or worse for people compared to 50 years before (see Figure 6.4), it did canvass experts in technology and social change in 2020 on how they thought life might change after Covid-19 (Anderson et al., 2021), and the results were mixed: many felt that life would become worse for most people as inequalities grew, authoritarianism took a deeper hold, and misinformation spread (see Chapter 12), but many also felt that our deepening reliance on technology would help bring improvements in the workplace, health care, and social activity. What effect such changes might have on political culture and trust in government remains to be seen, and how best we might work to restore trust is debatable (see *Exploring Problems 6*).

POLITICAL CULTURE IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

One of the most authoritarian regimes in the world is Syria, which was governed for 30 years by Hafez al-Assad, who was succeeded upon his death in 2000 by his son Bashar. In 2011, the latter launched a violent response to peaceful protests against his regime that quickly degenerated into a civil war

EXPLORING PROBLEMS 6

HOW CAN WE RESTORE TRUST IN GOVERNMENT?

Trust is not only a difficult concept to explain, but it is also hard to measure. What is it, and how do we know whether or not we trust another person, or a group of people, or an institution, or an entire political system? To a large extent, the answers to such questions are subjective and intuitive rather than objective and measurable. Nonetheless, polls in multiple countries have found declining levels of trust in government, key institutions (such as the media and business), and even of people in each other. Hence, we have to assume that while most of us might have trouble defining trust (or its absence), we know enough about it intuitively to be aware of its presence or absence, and to know if it is growing or declining.

In thinking about political trust, we need to ask at least four sets of questions:

- What explains levels of trust in government? Is it driven by levels of faith in the political system, or by specific events, or by focused but ongoing problems such as corruption or elitism?
- Are changes in levels of trust caused by economic cycles, by changes of government, or by other pressures?
- Is trust in government driven by our views about institutions or by our views about the people who inhabit those institutions and the way they conduct themselves?
- How do levels of trust vary by age, gender, job, financial situation, social class, level of education, religion, and related factors?

Clearly, low and/or declining levels of trust in government or the political system are undesirable, and it would be best if we could collectively identify the problems and then try to correct them (assuming that this is actually possible). How do we do this?

- Should we start by looking at those countries whose people (according to polls) have the highest levels of trust in each other (such as China, Finland, Norway, and Sweden), and try to understand what they have done right?
- Should we look at those countries with the lowest levels of trust (such as Brazil, Colombia, Peru, and the Philippines), and try to understand what they have done wrong?

in which an estimated 306,000 civilians had died by 2022 (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2022). The Assad regime accepted military assistance from Iran and Russia, and used chemical weapons such as chlorine against its own people. Although there are different explanations for Assad's determination to maintain control at any cost, one of them is founded in political culture: ruling elites in the Arab world, suggests Khatib (2021), often insist that they are the state, and that their continuation in power is essential to the stability of the state. Assad even went so far as to claim that any form of opposition to his administration could be defined as treason.

ATPImages / Contributor

Syria's President Bashar al-Assad (left) welcomes Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi (with turban) on a visit to Syria. Authoritarian leaders often see themselves as the embodiment of the state, few more so than the leaders of these two countries.

Although Assad and his supporters no doubt subscribe to this view, it is questionable how far it can be said to apply to political culture in Syria more generally. To begin with, the regime has many critics and opponents who would take a different view, while Khatib herself argues that many outsiders make assumptions about political culture in the Arab world that are simplistic, and also anachronistic in that they fail to account for the changes taking place in the region. We also saw earlier in this chapter that it is important to make a distinction between elite political culture and the values and expectations of the population at large, or those of different segments within that population. This is particularly true of authoritarian regimes, which – as we saw in Chapter 5 – are mainly centred on the power of a ruler and the elite group surrounding that ruler.

Knowing how to think about the Syrian case, or to understand political culture in authoritarian regimes more generally, is handicapped by how little research has been done on the topic. In fact, whole books on the topic of authoritarian or non-democratic government occasionally manage to get by without a single mention of political culture. Mauk (2017) points not only to how little we know about the relationship between political culture and authoritarianism, but also to the rarity of systematic comparisons between democratic and authoritarian regimes, and of comparisons among authoritarian regime types, such as ruling monarchies, ruling parties, and military regimes (see Chapter 5). The difficulties continue to build when we realize the importance of separating the effects on political culture of authoritarian rule from those of poverty, social divisions, colonialism, and other influences.

If there is a broad difference between democratic and authoritarian regimes, it may lie in the distinction made by Almond and Verba between the democratic

ideal of a pluralist civic culture emphasizing self-expression, and the suggestion by Welzel and Inglehart (2009) that many authoritarian regimes are sustained by a cultural emphasis among their populations on security. Specifically, Welzel and Inglehart suggest that people in low-income countries prioritize authority and strong leadership over freedom and self-expression. What is more, if a democracy does emerge in such unsympathetic cultures, it may be unstable: 'democracy is fragile when it is a "democracy without democrats"', they argue. Even if people reject today's authoritarian leaders, they may simply want to replace them with another set of non-democratic rulers. In other words, analysts who interpret all dissent in dictatorships as a plea for democracy may simply be seeing what they wish for, while democrats living under authoritarian regimes may interpret democracy less as self-rule than as social order, national autonomy, and a strong economy.

An example of an authoritarian culture centred on security and order is Russia. Many in the West wanted to believe that they were witnessing a transition to democracy in Russia in the 1990s, and have since been surprised to see a 'return' to authoritarianism under Vladimir Putin. Russia, though, is still living with what McAllister (2014) once described as 'the burden of history' (a point that, in fairness, could be made of almost any society when considering its political culture). There are many in Russia who still look back on the Soviet era with nostalgia, and admire what they see as the strong and decisive leadership displayed then.

According to polls carried out by the Moscow-based Levada Centre in 2020, 65 per cent of Russians regretted the disintegration of the Soviet Union, 75 per cent agreed with the proposition that the Soviet era was the best time in the country's history, and 63 per cent approved of Vladimir Putin's work as president. The fact that the Soviet Union was one of the most repressive regimes in the world, and that Putin's Russia is clearly authoritarian, does not seem to worry many of them. In another poll in April 2020, only half of Russians agreed that it was important to able to change government leaders, while 37 per cent felt that stability was more important, with a small circle of politicians in power (Levada Centre, 2020).

In many authoritarian Islamic countries, meanwhile, authoritarian rulers seek to draw from the well of Islamic culture in a way that supports their hold on power. They present democracy as an alien Western concept which in practice leads to licence rather than freedom, to an emphasis on material rather than spiritual values, and to the pursuit of individual self-interest rather than social harmony. For example, Mahathir bin Mohamad, Prime Minister of Malaysia (1981–2003, and again in 2018–20), condemned Western democracies in which 'political leaders are afraid to do what is right, where the people and their leaders live in fear of the free media which they so loudly proclaim as inviolable' (Dhillon, 2009). Through such statements, authoritarian rule can be presented as an indigenous cultural tradition inherently opposed to Western liberalism.

At the same time, though, the Muslim world is far from united in terms of how its political culture should be defined or understood. In fact, Adrahtas and Milani (2020) argue that 'division seems to be one of the most potent forces in

the shaping of the Islamic world'. Their focus is on the divisions between Sunni and Shia Muslims, accentuated since the 1979 revolution in Iran by a difference of opinion between the two sides over political leadership versus religious leadership. Islam is also divided between Arabs and non-Arabs, between urban and rural Muslims, and by rivalries for influence in the Middle East and North Africa.

Occasionally in authoritarian systems, we find elites being removed – whether through popular uprisings or through electoral upsets – and being replaced by new regimes that go about redefining what might be regarded as 'normal' in regard to political culture. This has happened, for example, in almost every case of a revolution that has toppled an old regime, ranging from France in 1789 to Mexico in 1910–20, Russia in 1917, Egypt in 1952, Cuba in the 1950s, and Iran in 1979. More recently, a similar story of change has come to Venezuela, albeit by different means; rather than overthrowing an existing regime, Hugo Chávez came to power in 1998 by winning an election, at which point he launched his Bolivarian revolution.

Named for Venezuelan revolutionary leader Simón Bolívar (1783–1830), the revolution came in the wake of austerity measures imposed in Venezuela and several other Latin American countries in their effort to recover from the regional debt crisis of the mid-1980s. Its core features are described by Strønen (2017) as an effort to challenge a political culture shaped by the country's history as a major oil producer, and to break the hegemony of the middle and upper classes by mobilizing the poor and reforming state institutions. When Chávez died in office in 2013, he left behind a deeply divided society, a chaotic economy, many unmet promises for change, and widespread disillusion with continuous political reform. Matters have only worsened under his successor Nicolás Maduro (see *Spotlight 12*).

Placed within its wider context, it is important to note that relatively little is known about political culture in Latin America, making it more difficult to assess the meaning of the Venezuelan case. Booth and Richard (2015) point out that electoral democracy has long been scarce in the region, tends to break down when it emerges, and that while much progress has been made as Latin American countries have thrown off military dictatorships, the staying power of electoral democracy is uncertain at best. The Venezuelan case, they conclude, raises questions about the commitment of elites and masses alike to democracy.

When it comes to much of sub-Saharan Africa, meanwhile, one of the key challenges faced by political scientists is to distinguish indigenous political values from those created by the fallout from the colonial experience. When the borders of European states were formed, it was as a result of conflict and competition among Europeans themselves. By contrast, the borders of most African (and Middle Eastern) states were imposed from outside, by European colonial powers, paying no heed to political, cultural, or religious realities. The result was the creation of contrived political units in which communities with different histories were expected to work together and to build a sense of national unity while also governing with partly formed political systems and underdeveloped economies.

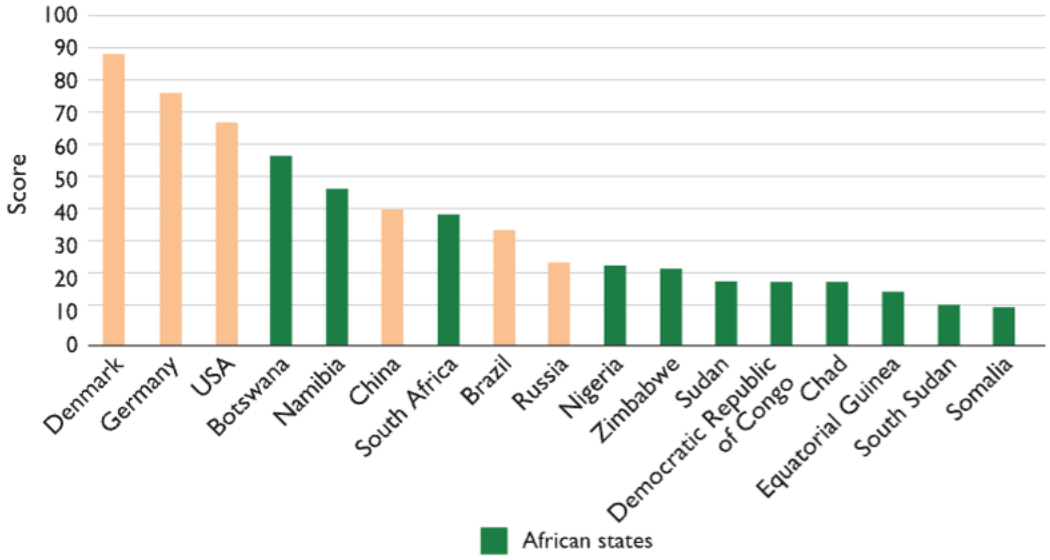

Figure 6.7 African corruption compared

Source: Based on Transparency International (2023). Scores are out of 100, with the highest scores indicating the least corruption. Denmark has the highest score, with 90. Somalia has the lowest score, with 11.

Nigeria (a hybrid regime) is a case in point of the resulting problems. In pre-colonial times, ethnic groups in the region such as the Hausa and Yoruba had worked out a balance between themselves that protected them from too much mutual interference. The creation of Nigeria in 1914 by British colonialism forced these groups to live and work together and to build shared systems of government and administration, setting them on a path of mutual hostility as they competed for power and resources and struggled to preserve their identity. Lacking a state tradition, Nigerians continue even today to find it hard to trust government officials, so they look instead to their communities for stability, and they believe that loyalty to the community is paramount. So persistent have Nigeria's ethnic divisions become that they once led a frustrated Wole Soyinka (1997) – the Nigerian novelist and 1986 Nobel laureate for literature – to dismiss the idea of a Nigerian nation as a 'farcical illusion'.

How much of the Nigerian experience with political culture is truly Nigerian, and how much is a consequence of Nigeria's difficulties in building a sense of national unity? Can modernization make a difference in such circumstances? Does Nigeria even have discernible political cultural trends that have roots in Nigerian society and that are subject to the same kinds of pressures and influences as the trends we find in more democratic Western states with a longer history of relatively stable national identity? Or is the best that we can say about political culture in hybrid and authoritarian systems is that it exists, but that it is fundamentally negative in nature?

One of the more unfortunate effects of tensions such as these is the corruption found in many African countries. We saw in Chapter 5 that it is a global problem, and is particularly notable in authoritarian regimes, but Figure 6.7 shows that it is often severe in sub-Saharan Africa, where most countries fare

badly in absolute and comparative terms, ranking at the low end of the Corruption Perception Index. Only four of the 52 countries on the continent (Botswana, Cape Verde, Namibia, and Rwanda) score higher than 50 out of 100 on the scale, while 16 score 25 or less. So serious has the problem become that the African Union held its annual summit in 2018 under the theme 'Winning the fight against corruption: A sustainable path to Africa's transformation', and declared that 11 July would henceforth be Africa Anti-Corruption Day.

Amundsen (2019) uses the African case to make a distinction between bureaucratic and political corruption, the former involving the payments of bribes to, for example, police officers or border control officials for the provision of services, while the latter goes beyond greed and personal enrichment to help keep a regime afloat. Political corruption not only 'gives the incentives for controlling the state', he argues, but 'it is a means to maintain control of the state'. A political culture of limited transparency and accountability, and of patronage, has led not only to an expectation that investors seeking government contracts should first grease the palms of political leaders, but that this is a normal way of doing business and supporting leaders in office.

Although a lot more research is being undertaken on political culture in authoritarian regimes, and in democracies, much still remains to be done before we can really grasp their qualities. Only then can we productively compare the sources and qualities of political culture in different societies. We already know enough, though, to know that understanding political culture is important, and a critical part not just of understanding states and their sub-cultures, but also of understanding the similarities and differences in government and politics in democratic and authoritarian regimes, and in different regions around the world.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What are the key features of political culture in the state or society in which you live?
- Has multiculturalism failed?
- Apart from the groups listed in the chapter, how many others could be part of the conversation about identity politics?
- Does post-materialism still make sense as a way of understanding political culture in the West? Or more broadly?
- When people say that life in their country has become better or worse, is their conclusion based on hard realities or how they *think* their country once was?
- Is democratic and authoritarian political culture ultimately all that different?

KEY CONCEPTS

- Civic culture
- Cultural theory
- Elite
- Elite political culture
- Identity politics
- Multiculturalism
- Political culture
- Political trust
- Populism
- Post-materialism

FURTHER READING

Arato, Andrew, and Jean L. Cohen (2022) *Populism and Civil Society* (Oxford University Press). A review of the meaning of populism, explaining its origins and effects, with cases from different parts of the world.

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ONLINE RESOURCES

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SPOTLIGHT 6
GERMANY

PROFILE

Germany provides a fascinating case study for comparative politics. Created in 1871, it was a leading protagonist in two world wars, was then divided into separate democratic and communist countries, was reunited in 1990, and has since played a key role as a leader and paymaster of European integration. Because Germany naturally views European developments through the lens of its own system of government, the country's political institutions are of continental significance. Within a parliamentary framework, Germany offers a distinctive form: a chancellor democracy in which the nation's leader determines government policy, appoints cabinet ministers, heads a large staff, and can be removed from office only when the legislature can agree a named successor. Germany boasts the largest economy in Europe, and its skilled employees, working in capital-intensive factories, produce premium manufactured goods for export. Its military influence in the world, however, is distinctly limited.

Form of government	Federal parliamentary republic consisting of 16 Länder (states). Modern state formed 1949, and most recent constitution (the Basic Law) adopted 1949.
Executive	Parliamentary. The chancellor leads a cabinet of between 16 and 22 ministers, while a president (elected to five-year terms – renewable once – by a special convention of the *Bundestag* and *Länder*) serves as ceremonial head of state.
Legislature	Unicameral: a 630-member *Bundestag* elected for renewable four-year terms. Although it functions like an elected upper house, the 69-member *Bundesrat* consists of delegates drawn from the *Länder*.
Judiciary	Germany is a state based on law (a *Rechtsstaat*). The Federal Constitutional Court has proved to be highly influential as an arbiter of the constitution. It has 16 members divided into two 'senates', and appointed for 12-year terms with mandatory retirement at age 68.
Electoral system	The Bundestag is elected through mixed member proportional representation, with half elected using single member plurality and half using Länder party list proportional representation. Members of the Bundesrat are nominated by the Länder.
Parties	Multi-party. Major parties include the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), its Bavarian partner the Christian Social Union (CSU), and the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Other significant players are the Free Democrats, the Green Party, and the right-wing Alternative for Germany.
Population	84 million
Gross Domestic Product	$4,082 billion
Per capita GDP	$48,718
Democracy Index rating	Full Democracy
Freedom House rating	Free
Corruption score	78/100
Human Development Index rating	Very High

CASE STUDY: POLITICAL CULTURE IN GERMANY

Political culture is shaped in large part by a country's history, and the post-war division of Germany set the foundations for a rare natural experiment, allowing us to gauge how thinking evolved in the democratic and capitalist western part of Germany and in the authoritarian and communist eastern part of Germany.

Trends were mainly positive in the west, where the proportion of people expressing pride in their political institutions increased between 1959 and 1988 from 7 to 51 per cent, while support for a multi-party system grew from 53 to 92 per cent. While there were no similar surveys in the east under communism, polls carried out in eastern Germany after reunification in 1990 revealed that most people in the east were significantly less trusting of the national political and legal system, and of each other, than were people in the west (Rainer and Siedler, 2009).

NurPhoto / Contributor

Tourists visit the remnants of the Berlin Wall, once a potent physical division of the Cold War, and still today a reminder of the differences in political culture between western and eastern Germany.

There has since been evidence of declining contrasts between east and west, but differences remain: disposable income and the percentage of younger people are both higher in the west, while unemployment and support for right-wing political parties are higher in the east. Easterners tend to perceive westerners as bourgeois, patronizing, materialistic, and individualistic. Tellingly, a 2014 poll found that 75 per cent of easterners considered reunification to have been a success, but only 50 per cent of westerners felt the same way (Noack, 2014). Studies carried out in 2020 to mark the 30th anniversary of reunification found that little had changed.

It is reasonable to suppose that cultural contrasts will continue to weaken if (and this is a big if) living standards in the east converge on those in the west. In such circumstances, the more materialistic culture in the east is likely to acquire the post-material tinge long found in the west. For now, though, unification without unity remains a common theme in discussions of German political culture.

Further Reading

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PART 2 INSTITUTIONS

CHAPTERS

7 Constitutions and courts
8 Executives
9 Legislatures
10 Bureaucracies
11 Sub-national government
12 The media

PREVIEW

The second part of the book focuses on the key institutions of government and politics. It opens with a survey of constitutions and the courts that support them, explaining how the rules of government are established and understood. This is followed by chapters on executives, legislatures, and bureaucracies, listing the different types of each, and comparing their different structures and roles in the political systems of which they are a part. Part 2 ends with chapters reviewing and comparing unitary and federal systems of administration, and assessing the rapidly changing role of media in the political process.

Pvliha via Getty Images

7

Constitutions and courts

CONTENTS

- Understanding constitutions
- Origins and evolution
- The role of courts
- The role of the judiciary
- Constitutions and courts in authoritarian regimes

PREVIEW

So far, we have looked mainly at the broad sweep of comparative politics, including key concepts, research methods, regime types, and political culture. In the next few chapters we will focus on political institutions, beginning here with a review of constitutions and the courts that accompany them. Constitutions outline the rules of political systems, and tell us much about the aspirations of states, the structure of governments, and the rights of citizens. For their part, courts strive to make sure that the rules are respected and equally applied. Just as humans are imperfect, however, so are the laws and institutions they create and manage; there are significant gaps between constitutional ideals and practice, and questions about the efficacy of courts.

The chapter begins with an assessment of constitutions: what they are, what they do, their character and durability, how their performance can be measured, how they are changed, and how they have evolved. There is no fixed template for constitutions, they vary widely in terms of their length and efficacy, and the gap between aspiration and achievement differs from one constitution to another. The chapter goes on to look at the structure and role of courts and their relationship with constitutions, examining the differences between supreme courts and constitutional courts, and the incidence of judicial activism. It then focuses on judges: how they are recruited, the terms of their tenure, and how such differences impact judicial independence. It ends with an assessment of the place of constitutions and courts in authoritarian regimes.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Constitutions are critical to achieving an understanding of government, offering a power map through key political principles and rules.
- As the number of states increased, so did the number of constitutions, and more than half the states in the world have adopted a new constitution since 1990.
- Understanding governments requires an appreciation not just of the content of constitutions, but also of their durability and how they are amended.
- Awareness of the structure and role of courts is also critical, as is the distinction between supreme courts and constitutional courts.
- Judges have become more willing to enter the political arena, making it more important to understand the rules on judicial recruitment.
- In authoritarian regimes, constitutions and courts are weak, with governments either using them as a facade or bypassing them altogether.

UNDERSTANDING CONSTITUTIONS

Chile has a vibrant political system, ranking as a full democracy on the Democracy Index, with high scores electoral pluralism, the functioning of government, and civil liberties. In one area, though, it lags behind: it is still governed on the basis of a constitution adopted in 1980 during the military government of General Augusto Pinochet. He stepped down in 1990, following which pressures to rewrite the constitution grew, reaching a new height in 2019–20 on the back of an economic downturn, the Covid-19 pandemic, social unrest, and a resistance to elitism. A new constitution was drawn up and put to a public referendum in September 2022, in which it was rejected by the unexpectedly high margin of 62 per cent to 38 per cent. Although most Chileans are in favour of a new constitution, critics saw the draft as too liberal and as too much of a threat to some of Chile's core republican political values. With this in mind, a new draft was developed and put to a public vote in a December 2023 referendum, where it was once again rejected (by 56 to 44 per cent), in part this time for being too conservative.

Constitutions are the bedrock of government, being documents (or sets of documents) that typically include four key elements: an aspirational preamble, rules on the structure and powers of the institutions of government, a statement both of the limits on governmental power and of the rights of citizens, and the rules involved in constitutional amendments (see Figure 7.1). A system of government without a constitution is not a system at all, but an unorganized collection of habits that can be changed at the whim of the leaders or the people. Constitutions address this problem by offering benchmarks against which the performance of government can be measured. In the case of democracies, the authority provided by a constitution helps promote predictability and security. In the case of authoritarian regimes, by contrast, the terms of constitutions are often interpreted to suit the needs of ruling elites, and are sometimes ignored altogether.

Constitution: A document or a set of documents that outlines the powers, institutions, and structure of government, as well as expressing the rights of citizens and the limits on government.

Recent decades have seen a growth of interest in the study of constitutions, for several reasons:

- There has been an explosion of constitution-making, with 112 countries adopting new constitutions between 1990 and 2020 (Comparative Constitutions Project, 2024).

Element	*Purpose*
Preamble	Seeks popular support for the document with a stirring declaration of principles and, sometimes, a definition of the purposes of the state.
Organization	Sets out the powers and structure of government institutions.
Rights	Covers individual and often group rights, including access to legal redress.
Amendment procedure	Outlines the procedure for revising the constitution.

Figure 7.1 Elements of constitutions

- Judges and courts in many democracies have become more willing to step into the political arena, in a process known as constitutional or judicial review (explained later in this chapter).
- New interest in human rights has lent itself to judicial engagement.
- With domestic laws and policies increasingly impacted by international law, judges are called on to arbitrate the conflicting claims that often result.
- There are growing concerns that the efficacy of modern constitutions is waning, and that they are increasingly being used – as Smith and Beeman (2020) put it – 'as vehicles for, not as checks upon, the direct expressions of the will of the majority'. Their quality and efficacy have taken on new significance in the wake of declining trust in government and concerns about elitism, with worried questions about the extent to which they protect individual rights and give us the governing institutions that we deserve.

In democracies, constitutions have four main roles (summarized in Figure 7.2). First, they act as the supreme law of the land. This means that all other laws of a state, and the actions of all other institutions as they relate to government, are subsidiary to the constitution, which is the final point of reference regarding which laws and action are acceptable or not. This is particularly emphasized in those states that have named their constitutions the Basic Law (as in Germany and Israel) or the Fundamental Law (as in Hungary and the Vatican).

Second, they act as a power map, identifying the key institutions of government, providing details on the power and purpose of each institution and the limits on the term of officeholders, and specifying the procedures for law-making. If we want to find out who does what in government (at least in a formal sense), and what rules apply to the functioning of government, it is to the constitution that we first need to turn. That is not the end of the story, though, because many of the details of government are also spelled out in laws, and much else of what is done in government comes out of traditions and informal procedures. Constitutions, though, are the ultimate point of references for the underlying rules.

Third, constitutions impose order through the principle of the rule of law discussed in Chapter 4. This means, in the words of the nineteenth-century

Role	*Features*
Supreme law of the land	All other laws are subsidiary.
Structuring institutions	Outlining the structure, powers, and responsibilities of the institutions of government.
Supporting the rule of law	Imposing order through a system of laws to which all citizens are equally subject.
Regulating the power of the state	Imposing limits on the powers of government.

Figure 7.2 Constitutions in democratic regimes

British jurist A.V. Dicey (1885), that no one can be punished except for a breach of the law, that no one is above the law, that everyone is equally subject to the law, and that we substitute a government of laws for a government of people. Under the rule of law, political leaders cannot exercise arbitrary power and the powerful are subject to the same laws as everyone else (see Meierhenrich and Loughlin, 2021). Theory differs from reality, however, and there are multiple and persistent examples of individuals being treated differently under the law, even in the most democratic of societies.

The fourth role of constitutions is found in the restrictions that they place on the powers of a state over its citizens. In other words, as well as saying what government can and should do, constitutions also say what government cannot and should not do. The restrictions are typically listed in a **bill of rights**, and include such traditional liberties as freedom of religion, speech, and assembly. Newer constitutions have sometimes extended these rights even further; the Polish constitution, for example, includes the right of parents 'to rear their children in accordance with their own convictions' and the freedom of workers to choose their occupation and their place of work. As a result of such changes, the length of constitutions is growing, with the newest running to an average (including amendments) of about 30,000 words (Comparative Constitutions Project, 2024). The listing of such rights, however, does not guarantee that they will be respected; as Chilton and Versteeg (2020) point out, enforcing rights is not always easy, and some (particularly those applying to distinct groups of people, such as religious groups or labour unions) are easier to enforce than those practised on a general basis, such as free speech.

Bill of rights: A list of the rights of the citizens of a state or a political community, contained within a constitution and designed to restrict the abuse of power by government.

While most countries have constitutions that are **codified** and can be found in a single document, a few (such as Britain, Canada, Israel, New Zealand, and Sweden) have **uncodified** constitutions based on different sources. In the case of Britain, the constitution can be found in a large body of statute and common law, commentaries written by constitutional experts, and customs and traditions. This is because, unlike most countries, Britain never achieved independence from another country, and never went through the kind of sharp or revolutionary change that created the need for a new constitution. The distinction between codified and uncodified is not always neat and tidy, however, as the case of Sweden shows. Its constitution comprises four separate legislative acts passed between 1810 and 1991: the Instrument of Government describes the structure of government, the Act of Succession deals with the office of the monarchy, and additional rights are outlined in the Freedom of the Press Act and the Fundamental Law on Freedom of Expression.

Codified constitution: One that is set out in a single, self-contained document.

Uncodified constitution: One that is spread among several documents.

ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

The United States constitution – drafted in 1787 and adopted in 1789 – is often described as the world's oldest constitution, but whether or not this is the case depends on how constitutions are defined and understood. Greek city-states had agreements that functioned much like constitutions, and many early

European societies – including the Franks, the Lombards, the Saxons, and the Visigoths – developed codified laws that also functioned as basic constitutions. The Magna Carta signed in England in 1215 had some of the features of a constitution, because it placed limits on the power of the monarch, while both England and Sweden adopted Instruments of Government in the mid-1600s that functioned as constitutions. In addition, the US constitution was itself pre-dated by the constitutions of the 13 individual American states, and by the Articles of Confederation, ratified in 1781.

However we think of it, though, the US constitution undoubtedly inspired many others; the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and France adopted their first written constitutions in 1791, for example, and as the number of states grew in the nineteenth century, so did the number of constitutions: those of Norway (1814), the Netherlands (1815), Belgium (1831), and Luxembourg (1842), among others, are still in force today. France alone saw the adoption of ten constitutions between 1791 and 1852, although its current constitution dates only from 1958.

With the expansion of the Westphalian state system and the creation of newly independent states in the twentieth century, the number of constitutions grew. Many represented a fresh start after a period of disruption (see Figure 7.3), often experiencing a difficult birth, particularly when they were compromises between political actors working to address distrust and conflict. For example, as South Africa emerged in the 1990s from decades of apartheid, it faced the challenge of achieving an accommodation between leaders of the country's different ethnic communities against a backdrop of the tensions of continuing racial hostility; see *Spotlight 7* on South Africa at the end of this chapter.

Because they are often based on compromises, many constitutions contain ambiguous and even contradictory wording. Drafters may be more concerned with a short-term political fix than with establishing a resilient structure for the long run, as a result of which constitutions often reflect an incomplete settlement between suspicious partners. One of the effects is that they sometimes fail

Cause	*Examples*
Regime change	The 2017 constitution designed to strengthen the role of the military in Thailand after the 2014 military coup, or the 2019 constitution of Cuba designed to 'modernize' the government.
Structural political change	Bolivia (2009), Kenya (2010), Zimbabwe (2013), and Tunisia (2014).
Post-war reconstruction	Japan after 1945, Iraq after 2005.
Independence	The United States, much of Africa in the 1950s and 1960s, and the 15 republics created by the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Figure 7.3 Why new constitutions are written

to endow rulers with enough authority, limiting the effectiveness of government. The Italian constitution illustrates this problem with its hallmark of *garantismo*, meaning that all political forces are guaranteed a stake in the political system. Agreed in 1948, it established a strong bicameral legislature and provided for regional autonomy, while trying to prevent a recurrence of the pre-war fascist dictatorship and to accommodate the radical aspirations of the political left. The result was weak centralized control and ineffective governance, and efforts were made with four referendums in 2001–20 (only two of which were approved) to change the structure of Italian government. The most recent, in 2020, reduced the membership of the lower Chamber of Deputies from 630 to 400, and of the upper Senate from 315 to 200. (See Chapter 9 for more details.)

In assessing the quality of constitutions, it is tempting to look at their age and how often they have been replaced: in this regard, the best such documents – superficially, at least – are those that have lasted the longest, while states that often change their constitutions may be experiencing difficulties. In this sense, those older countries that have only had one constitution (including Australia, Canada, India, the UK, and the United States) stand in contrast to the Dominican Republic, which drew up its first constitution shortly after independence in 1844, and adopted its 39th and newest constitution in 2015. Long-standing constitutions, though, are not necessarily stable and effective documents, and the story with the Dominican Republic is deceiving: it has had many constitutions less because of instability and mainly because it follows a practice of promulgating new constitutions whenever amendments are adopted. In reality, the 'new' constitutions do not differ much from their predecessors.

Longevity does not necessarily equate with quality, and a more important indicator is the size of the gap between aspiration and reality, or between what a constitution says and what happens in practice. This has been a problem in the case of the constitution of Mexico, which was both radical and progressive from the time it was adopted in 1917. It contains principles that bar discrimination of any kind, provide for free education, establish the equality of men and women, limit the working day to eight hours, and prohibit vigilante justice. Mexicans often argue, though, that many of its goals have not been met in practice, and they consider the constitution still to be a work in progress. One analysis (Castagnola and Noriega, 2017) argues that matters have not been helped by the failure of the Mexican Supreme Court to help Mexico with its transition to democracy since the 1990s.

Recent developments in the United States offer additional insights into the problem of the aspirational gap. The US constitution did not change after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, but the detention of alleged terrorists in Guantanamo Bay and revelations about the use of torture and the increased monitoring by government agencies of phone and electronic communications raised troubling questions about the health of individual rights in the United States. The aspirational gap continues to be illustrated by the problem of institutionalized sexism and racism in the United States. Women continue to be paid less than men for equivalent work, and struggle to break the glass ceiling in politics and business. Meanwhile, the advent since 2013 of the Black Lives Matter movement – drawing attention to racially motivated violence against

black people – has served to emphasize ways in which the US constitution has failed to live up to the goals outlined in its preamble: 'to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic Tranquillity … and secure the Blessing of Liberty to ourselves and our posterity'.

Another measure of the performance of constitutions lies in how they are amended, how often they are amended, and how well – or badly – they keep up with the times. Needs and expectations change, and constitutions should change with them, but only up to a point: too many amendments, or amendments that are too easily made, can result in instability, while too few amendments, or amendments that are hard to make, can result in stagnation. The issue here is **entrenchment**, a term describing the higher level and wider spread of support required for amendments to a constitution than is the case for ordinary legislative bills (see Barber, 2016).

Entrenchment: The question of the legal procedures for amending a constitution.

Flexible constitution: One that can be amended more easily, often in the same way that ordinary legislation is passed.

Rigid constitution: One that is entrenched, requiring more demanding amendment procedures.

In the case of a **flexible constitution**, changes can be made relatively easily, while changing a **rigid constitution** is more difficult, usually demanding super- or concurrent majorities (see Table 7.1 for examples of amendment processes). On the one hand, flexibility offers the advantage of ready adaptability, offers the benefit of a stable political framework, and benefits government by limiting the prospects of new leaders or governments changing the constitution after they come to power. In New Zealand, this flexibility allowed changes to the electoral system and government administration in the 1980s and 1990s,

Table 7.1: Comparing constitutional amendments

Country	Approval requirements	Entrenchment level
Australia	Both houses of the legislature, then a referendum achieving a concurrent majority overall and in a majority of states.	Rigid
Canada	Both houses of the legislature and two-thirds of the provinces containing at least half the country's population.	Rigid
Nigeria	Two-thirds majority in both houses of the legislature and approval by two-thirds of state legislatures.	Rigid
Iran	Review by a constitutional convention, and majority approval in a national referendum.	Rigid
Ireland	Majority in both houses of the legislature and majority approval in a national referendum.	Rigid
Russia	Two-thirds majority in the lower chamber of the legislature, a three-fourths majority in the upper chamber, and two-thirds of regional legislatures.	Rigid
United States	Two-thirds majority in both houses of the legislature and approval by three-quarters of the states.	Rigid
Germany	Two-thirds majority in both houses of the legislature.	Flexible
India	Two-thirds majority in both houses of the legislature and a majority of the total membership of each house.	Flexible
Sweden	Majority vote by two successive sessions of the legislature with an intervening election.	Flexible

while in the United Kingdom it allowed the devolution of significant powers to Scotland and Wales in 1999 without much constitutional fuss. On the other hand, rigidity of the kind found in Australia, Russia, and the United States can make it difficult to achieve changes supported by electoral majorities, and even discourage attempts to change a constitution.

The most extreme form of entrenchment is an **eternity clause**, or one that cannot be amended at all. The idea is most often associated with the Basic Law of Germany, which – in Article 79(3) – says that changes to the principles of respect for human dignity, the constitutional order, and the federal structure of Germany are 'inadmissible'. For their part, the French and Turkish constitutions guarantee the republican character of their regimes, while the Iranian constitution forbids amendments that change the Islamic character of government and laws. These statements are usually designed to enforce a break with the old regime, but they also provide ammunition to critics who see constitutions as the dictatorship of the dead over the living. Under the new conditions, they might argue, past solutions sometimes have a way of turning into current problems.

Eternity clause: An element of a constitution that is considered inalienable and that cannot be amended or removed.

A key element of the amendment procedure is the role of the legislature. In one scenario, constitutions can be amended simply through legislative majorities, as in the cases of European states with a strong commitment to parliamentary supremacy. In another scenario, amendments cannot be approved by the legislature alone, the constitution standing supreme over the legislature. In Australia, for example, amendments must be endorsed not only by the federal parliament, but also by a referendum achieving a concurrent majority of most states together with the country as a whole. A total of 44 amendments have been proposed in Australia, of which only eight have won enough support to go through, the most recent in 1977. Four sets of amendments since then – including changes to parliamentary terms, the establishment of a republic, and the creation of an advisory council for aboriginal peoples (in 2023) – have all failed to be approved. Australia, note Williams and Hume (2010) 'has a grand tradition of reform … and a tradition of world-leading governance arrangements' (including being the second country in the world to extend the vote to women), and yet it has found it hard to change its constitution, even when there is broad support for reform. The needed changes, they argue, include bipartisan approaches, popular education, and a modernizing of the referendum process.

Changes can also be made by means other than a formal amendment. The most important of these devices are judicial review (the rulings of constitutional courts; see next section), and the passage of new laws that change some aspect of the rules of government. At the same time, simple customs and traditions should not be forgotten; there is often much about the structure of government that is not written, but has simply become a tradition. Political parties play a critical role in government all over the world, for example, but there may not always be much said about them in constitutions.

THE ROLE OF COURTS

Constitutions are neither self-made nor self-implementing, and they need the support of institutions that can protect or adjudicate their provisions by striking down unconstitutional laws and practices. This is where courts and the

Judiciary: A collective term for the judges within the system of courts that interpret and apply the law in keeping with the constitution.

Judicial review: The power of a court to nullify any laws or actions proposed or taken by government officials that contravene the constitution. Also known as constitutional review.

Cassation: The power of the highest court in a state to review decisions by lower courts.

judiciary enter the equation, using the power of **judicial review** to determine the constitutionality of laws, policies, or the actions of government. The number of courts has grown with the number of constitutions, but different countries have opted for different ways of arranging their courts: some have specialized constitutional courts that focus on judicial review, others have supreme courts that blend the powers of judicial review and **cassation**, while some have only the power of cassation, and yet others have multiple courts with different powers and functions (their work exemplifying the importance of institutional approaches to comparative politics; see *Using Theory 7*).

USING THEORY 7

INSTITUTIONALISM

The study of governing institutions has long been a central interest of political science in general, and of comparative politics in particular. In fact, institutions were long regarded as the core subject matter of political science, and scholarship was dominated by **institutionalism**, using approaches that were often descriptive and less interested in developing theory. Institutionalism briefly fell out of favour in the 1960s as the behavioural movement emerged (see *Using Theory 14*), but was revisited in the 1980s when new research on social and political structures combined with the reform of governing institutions in developing countries to give birth to what became known as **new institutionalism** (or neo-institutionalism) (March and Olsen, 1984).

This revision looked not just at the formal rules of government but also at how institutions shaped political decisions, at the interaction of institutions and society, and at the informal patterns of behaviour within formal institutions. This approach lent itself well to comparative politics as researchers undertook cross-national studies, many of them interested in better understanding the process of democratization.

One of the benefits of the institutional approach is that it can tell us not only how institutions work, but also where their strengths and weaknesses lie, and what can be done to make them more efficient. It also reminds us that institutions are constantly changing in response to new circumstances, and are frequently subject to a process of **institutionalization**. This begins following their creation, as they develop rules and procedures, build internal complexity, entrench their position, are clearly distinguished from their environment, and come to be accepted by external actors as part of the governing apparatus. It continues as they evolve in response to pressures for change, as well as new needs and opportunities.

We should also remember that institutions do not tell us the whole story about a political system, because they rarely act independently of social forces. In many authoritarian regimes, for example, the entire superstructure of government is a facade behind which personal networks and exchanges are the key driving force in politics. Even in democratic regimes, it is always worth asking whose interests benefit from a particular institutional arrangement. Just as an institution can be created for specific purposes, so too can it survive by serving the interests of those in charge.

Institutionalism: An approach to the study of politics and government that focuses on the structure and dynamics of governing institutions.

New institutionalism: A revival of institutionalism that goes beyond formal rules and looks at how institutions shape decisions and define interests.

Institutionalization: The process by which organizations build history, memory, stability, and permanence.

Few constitutions initially made provision for judicial review, not even the US constitution, which is often seen as a template for judicial review; the US Supreme Court gave itself this power with a decision in 1803. Much has since changed, with the result that courts have come to play an increasingly important role in government. This is a development that Ginsburg (2008) describes as 'a global institutional norm' that has spread to nearly every democratic regime as well as several authoritarian regimes. Hirschl (2008) has even gone so far as to write about the rise of juristocracy, or government by judges.

These changes have been reflected in efforts by political parties and leaders in several democratic countries to limit the powers of courts, even at the risk of undermining the health of democracy. It has happened, for example, in Hungary and Poland, where governments dominated by populist parties have worked to control judges and the judicial appointment process, to weaken checks and balances provided by courts, and even to ignore rulings by the courts. In few cases have these efforts raised more ire than in Israel, where the return to government of prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu in 2023 was accompanied by reforms design to weaken the Supreme Court and to undermine judicial oversight of the executive (Cook, 2023). This was done with the passage of a law that prevented judges from overturning government decisions that they deemed 'unreasonable'. The result was months of public protests, and the arresting sight of the Supreme Court hearing cases dealing with the legality of its own overhaul. In January 2024, in a narrow vote of 8–7, the court struck down the law.

There are now two kinds of court with authority over constitutions: supreme courts and constitutional courts.

Supreme courts

These courts are found in decentralized systems in which ordinary courts can engage in judicial review, but where there is a single national court – the supreme court – that acts as the final court of appeal, and that can rule on constitutional matters as well as questions of common and statute law. Sometimes known as the American model, because it is based on the lead of the US Supreme Court, this is the more traditional approach to protecting constitutions, found in most of the Spotlight cases used in this book, with the exceptions of Egypt, Germany, Russia, and South Africa. To complicate matters slightly, several countries have supreme courts that go by other names; examples include the High Courts of Australia and Hong Kong. Further complicating matters, several European countries – including Spain – have supreme courts whose decisions (some or all) can be appealed to constitutional courts. Meanwhile, the United States has both a federal Supreme Court and supreme courts for each of its 50 states, while Canada has only a federal Supreme Court which can rule on all matters of federal and provincial law.

Supreme courts mainly (but not entirely) use **concrete review**, meaning that there is a 'case and controversy' requirement: they review cases where the law has already been applied or is about to be applied, and where there is an actual case in which the parties involved have legal standing, meaning that

Concrete review: Judgments made on the constitutional validity of law, policy or government action in the context of a specific case.

Table 7.2: Comparing supreme courts and constitutional courts

	Supreme court	Constitutional court
Form of review	Mainly concrete.	Mainly abstract.
Appellate function	Yes.	No.
Standing	Anyone with legal standing can bring a case.	Only specified institutions can bring cases.
Examples	Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, India, Japan, Mexico, Nigeria, Sweden, Turkey, United States.	Austria, Egypt, France, Germany, most of Eastern Europe, Russia, South Africa, UK.

they must have suffered actual or potential harm from a law. The prototypical case of a supreme court with concrete review is the United States. Although the US Supreme Court possesses **original jurisdiction** over cases to which a US state or a representative of another country is a party, its main role is **appellate**. That is, constitutional issues can be raised at any point in the ordinary judicial system and the Supreme Court selects only those cases that it believes raise significant constitutional questions. As a result, the vast majority of petitions for the Court to review a case are turned down. Among those issues on which the Court issues rulings during 2022 were climate change, school prayer, carrying guns in public, the separation of church and state, freedom of speech, and abortion rights.

Original jurisdiction: The power of a court to review cases that originate with the court itself.

Appellate: The power of a court to review decisions reached by lower courts.

Constitutional courts

These courts are found in centralized systems in which only the constitutional court itself – and not ordinary courts – can engage in judicial review (see Vanberg, 2015). Sometimes known as the European model, because it takes its lead from the Austrian Constitutional Court and is found in most European states, this form is based on the ideas of the jurist Hans Kelsen (1881–1973), who authored the 1920 Austrian constitution and served for ten years as a member of the new Austrian court. Constitutional courts are the functional equivalent of an additional legislative chamber, the difference being that they generate 'negative legislation' in the sense that they can overturn laws that are inconsistent with the norms of the constitution.

Another key difference is that while supreme courts mainly use concrete review based on specific cases, constitutional courts practise **abstract review**, meaning that they usually judge the constitutionality of a law or an action of government in the abstract, without reference to a specific case. In contrast to concrete review, abstract review can usually only begin with a constitutional challenge brought by specific public institutions, such as the government, the executive, or a group of members of the legislature. This can be done before a bill becomes a law, or within a specified period of time after it becomes law, and the constitutional court typically cannot refuse to hear the case. In some

Abstract review: Advice (not usually binding) given by a court on the constitutionality of a law, policy, or action of government.

countries, such as Germany and Spain, and many in Eastern Europe, constitutional courts can use both abstract and concrete review, and there have also been instances of supreme courts – such as the one in the United States – using abstract review to make decisions.

From its Austrian origins, the model of a constitutional court spread to continental Europe after World War II, and by 2005 had been adopted as a model by about half the world's states (Horowitz, 2006). Its popularity was encouraged by the success of Germany's Federal Constitutional Court (FCC), which – in addition to the power of judicial review – can adjudicate disputes between state and federal political institutions, protect individual rights, and protect the constitutional and democratic order against groups and individuals seeking to overthrow it (Langenbacher, 2022).

The FCC's reputation has been enhanced by the provision of constitutional complaint, which allows citizens to petition the Court directly once other judicial options are exhausted. Kommers (2006) describes the Court as 'the guardian of German democracy', pointing to its decisions on voting rights, public funding of election campaigns, the electoral system, and the rights of smaller political parties. In early 2021 it made a notable ruling on climate change, deciding not only that it was threat to human rights but also that some aspects of the 2019 German Climate Change Act placed too much of a burden on younger generations by not setting greenhouse gas emission targets beyond 2030.

ULI DECK / Stringer

Members of the Federal Constitutional Court of Germany stand to announce one of their recent decisions. The success of the court has helped encourage the adoption of the model of a constitutional court (in contrast to a supreme court).

THE ROLE OF THE JUDICIARY

Judicial restraint: The view that judges – out of deference to the elected branches of government – should not strike down laws unless they are obviously unconstitutional.

Judicial activism: The willingness of judges to venture beyond narrow legal reasoning, and potentially to influence public policy.

In order to understand courts, we not only need to appreciate how they are structured and the powers they have, but we also need to understand the political performance of judges, and where they sit on the spectrum between **judicial restraint** and **judicial activism**. To what extent should they function – in the words of the French philosopher Montesquieu – as the 'mouth of the law' and objectively apply the literal meaning of the constitution (to the extent that this is even humanly possible), and to what extent should they allow their personal values and ideological leanings to influence their decisions? The tendency in many parts of the world has been for judges to move from restraint to activism, and studies from as far afield as Bangladesh, India, South Africa, Canada, and the United States have reflected on the implications of this trend as judges become more willing to enter political arenas that would have once been left to elected politicians and national legislatures (see Coutinho et al., 2015).

In few countries has judicial activism recently gone further than the United States, where discussions about which way the US Supreme Court will vote on an issue are often driven less by constitutional principles than by the relative number of conservatives and liberals on the nine-person bench. Few of its decisions have been shaped so obviously by this as a June 2022 ruling in which the Court overturned nearly 50 years of precedent by deciding to end the federal constitutional right to abortion beyond 15 weeks of pregnancy by handing the decision back to the states. All six conservative members of the court (including three nominated by Donald Trump) ruled in favour, while the remaining three liberal justices ruled against. Conservative states took the opportunity to reinstate or activate often strict limits on abortion, while public approval of the Court – which had peaked in 1995 at 80 per cent – reached a new low of 48 per cent. There was a clear partisan divided in approval rates, though, with 73 per cent approval from Republicans and only 28 per cent approval from Democrats (Pew Research Center, 2022c).

By contrast, the French Constitutional Council – which dates back only to the creation of the Fifth Republic in 1958 – has a well-established reputation for judicial restraint (Espinosa, 2017). At least part of the explanation for this is that debates in the court – and the votes of its members – are not made public, helping promote the idea of the Council as an integrated body rather than defining it according to the ideological balance of its members (as is the case with the US Supreme Court). The political nature of the Council is also watered down by the ideological variety of French political parties, standing in contrast to the binary choice of American judges as tilting towards either the Democrats or the Republicans. Finally, the contrasting terms of office of the two courts have an effect: with life-time appointments (strictly speaking, 'good behaviour'), the political stakes are higher in the work of the US Supreme Court, while the single nine-year terms for the French court bring more turnover of judges and inject more variety into their ideological balance.

There are four key reasons for the drift from restraint to activism:

- The increasing reliance on social regulation encourages court intervention. A government decision to oppose same-sex marriage, for example, is open to judicial challenge in a way that a decision to go to war or raise taxes is not.
- The expansion of human rights in multiple countries has encouraged judicial activism as judges adopt a more prominent role in defending those rights.

- International treaties give judges an extra lever to move outside the limits of national law as they make decisions on the basis of agreements touching on topics as diverse as human rights, trade, finance, health, and the environment.
- The enduring reputation of judges for integrity and impartiality has seen them win new authority as the standing of many other institutions – notably political parties – has declined.

The growth in judicial activism has also raised questions about the health of **judicial independence**. If courts are to provide an objective assessment of the constitutionality of laws and the actions of government, then judges need to be independent. An increasing body of evidence, though, suggests that judicial independence is under threat in multiple countries, particularly as populist parties and leaders portray judges as part of the political establishment, and even 'enemies of the people' (Giannoulopoulos and McDermott, 2023). At the heart of that independence lie technical questions about how judges are recruited and how long they stay in office (see Table 7.3 and *Exploring Problems 7*). If recruitment was controlled by politicians, the judiciary would simply reinforce partisan authority, providing an integration (rather than a separation) of powers. Some kind of distance needs to be established, then, between judges and politicians.

Judicial independence: The idea that courts should be free from political influence, whether from other parts of government or from actors outside government.

At one end of the scale lie authoritarian regimes such as China, where all court appointments are made by the legislature, which is dominated by the Chinese Communist Party. There is no doubt here that judges are party appointees, and the fact that they serve a maximum of two five-year terms is moot in terms of

Table 7.3: Comparing judicial appointments

Country	Number of judges	Tenure	Process
China	13	Two five-year terms.	Appointed by legislature, which is dominated by Chinese Communist Party.
Germany	16	One 12-year term; age limit 68.	Elected by legislature; need two-thirds majority.
India	31	No fixed terms; age limit 65.	Appointed by president on recommendation of Chief Justice and four senior judges.
Italy	15	One nine-year term.	Five appointed by the President, five elected by Parliament, and five elected by other courts.
Nigeria	21	No fixed terms; age limit 70.	Appointed by president on recommendation of National Judicial Council, and confirmed by Senate majority.
Russia	19	One 12-year term.	Nominated by president, confirmed by majority in Federation Council.
South Africa	10	One 12-year term; age limit 70.	Nominated by Judicial Service Commission, appointed by president after consultation with Chief Justice and party leaders in National Assembly.
United Kingdom	12	No fixed terms; age limit 70 or 75 depending on age on appointment.	Appointed by monarch on advice of prime minister after nomination by selection commission.
United States	9	Life terms 'based on good behaviour'.	Nominated by the president, confirmed by majority in Senate.

bringing new ideas into the court. Politics also enters the equation in the United States, which has designed its courts in a way that all but guarantees high political stakes in appointments and rulings. Nominations to the US Supreme Court and to lower federal courts are made by the president and then must be confirmed with a straight majority vote in the US Senate. Furthermore, life-time appointments mean that there is little turnover, and that appointments will have an impact on the political balance of the courts for many years, even decades.

EXPLORING PROBLEMS 7

HOW CAN WE ENSURE THE INDEPENDENCE OF JUDGES?

It might be intuitive to believe that the political independence of judges is a key part of the foundation of an effective constitution, which is, in turn, a key part of the foundation of democracy. Just what judicial independence means, though, has long been a matter of debate, with particular questions asked about the difference between *de jure* independence (based on the formal rules of a legal system) and *de facto* independence (based on the political realities surrounding a legal system). Questions have also been asked about exactly how judicial independence should be measured, which raises questions, in turn, about how it is best protected.

Melton and Ginsburg (2014) developed a list of six constitutional features that they believe can be used to comparatively measure judicial independence:

- An explicit statement in a constitution on the independence of judges.
- The length of tenure of judges.
- The selection procedure for judges, and the bodies involved.
- The removal procedure for judges, and the bodies involved.
- The conditions under which judges can be removed.
- Protection of the salaries of judges.

Using these six features, the Comparative Constitutions Project (2024) – a US-based web site containing a wealth of information about constitutions – compares judicial independence around the world and produces some unexpected results. Only four countries (Argentina, Bulgaria, The Gambia, and Nepal) have all six features, while several countries that are quite different democratically (including Canada, Cuba, North Korea, Sweden, and Venezuela) each have only one, and the United States and Russia each have three. Clearly, *de jure* protection of judges and courts tells us only so much, and even Melton and Ginsburg themselves admit to being sceptical about the effect that a formal constitutional statement will have on judicial independence in practice.

- Where do these findings leave us in terms of measuring and achieving judicial independence?
- Is it something that we are most likely to understand intuitively when we see it (or find it to be missing), or do we need to rely on objective measures such as those listed above?
- Should we be surprised to see Sweden likened in any way to North Korea, and the United States in any way to Russia?

At the other end of the scale lie democratic regimes such as Germany and the UK, where judicial appointments – and therefore court rulings – are less political. Judges may be appointed or elected by the legislature, nominated or appointed by the executive, or appointed by independent panels or other judges. Alternatively, and more traditionally, some judges on the highest court can be selected by one method, while others lower down are chosen by a different method. There will also be limits on tenure, which may take the form of fixed terms, age limits, or both.

In Germany, members of the Constitutional Court are elected by the legislature, and while this may seem like a recipe for politicization, it is not. First, the legislature (the Bundestag) contains several political parties, so it avoids the binary political choice found in the US Senate. Then the parties in the Bundestag negotiate over the nominees, seeking candidates who are broadly acceptable, a quality that is strengthened by the need for nominees to be approved by a two-thirds supermajority. Finally, the role of politics is weakened by the requirement in the German court – and in many other European courts – that decisions are by consensus (instead of by majority vote, as in the United States).

CONSTITUTIONS AND COURTS IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

In 2017, widespread protests broke out in Iran, set off by economic issues but quickly evolving into demonstrations against the ruling regime. Among those supposedly encouraging the protests was Ruhollah Zam, an opposition activist living in asylum in France, from where he maintained a website named AmadNews and a messaging channel on the Telegram app. In October 2019, Zam was lured to Iraq, where he was arrested, and returned – against his wishes – to Iran. He was made to confess his 'transgressions' on television, and was then charged by one of Iran's Revolutionary Courts – which met in secret and without a jury – with 'corruption on earth', a term used to describe spying and treason. He was sentenced to death, the sentence was upheld by Iran's Supreme Court, and Zam was executed in December 2020.

In almost every respect, this event emphasizes the difference between two constitutional models:

- A democratic regime that is protected by a constitution and an independent judiciary, with respect for the rule of law.
- An authoritarian regime, where political opposition can be punished using a secretive procedure that is supported by the country's highest court.

Compared to democracies, the adoption and application of laws in authoritarian regimes is often more arbitrary, and based less on tried and tested principles than on the political goals and objectives of leaders and elites. No state provides perfectly equal application of the law, but democracies fare much better than authoritarian regimes, many of whose political weaknesses stem back to constitutional weaknesses. It is not that authoritarian regimes do not have constitutions, because they do, even though they sometimes take a long time to draft

Role	Features
Operating manual	Providing instructions on how government should function, thereby imposing some constraints on leaders.
Billboard	Signalling the intentions of rulers to both domestic and international audiences.
Blueprint	Describing things not as they are but as they might be, so as to help motivate people.
Window dressing	Giving the appearance of protecting rights without actually imposing constraints on leaders.

Figure 7.4 Constitutions in authoritarian regimes

and adopt (Myanmar, for example, needed 17 years to develop and adopt its 2008 constitution). However, why would they bother with constitutions, asks Ginsburg (2020), when the resulting documents are often meaningless, and when obviously sham documents fail to earn legitimacy? Among the answers he offers: constitutions fulfil many of the same functions as they do in democracies (such as minimizing conflict over the responsibilities of institutions) while also serving as operating manuals, billboards, blueprints, and window dressing (see Figure 7.4).

While exploiting constitutions to these ends, retaining a framework of law and a facade of judicial independence, many authoritarian regimes go further by using strategies designed to bypass constitutions and courts. The first of these – the declaration of a **state of emergency** during which normal government is suspended – has the effect of setting aside the constitution altogether. Greene (2018) defines the conditions behind emergencies as follows:

> A crisis identified and labelled by a state to be of such magnitude that it is deemed to cross a threat severity threshold, necessitating urgent, exceptional and, consequently, temporary actions by the state not permissible when normal conditions exist.

State of emergency: A situation in which a government gives itself additional powers to deal with a natural disaster, civil unrest, or armed conflict.

The key word here is *temporary*. While states of emergency are often declared in the wake of natural disasters, and numerous emergencies were declared around the world to address the Covid-19 pandemic, there is rarely an expectation in democratic regimes that they will continue indefinitely or be used for political ends. In authoritarian regimes, by contrast, emergencies (sometimes known as states of siege) can be declared when the ruling regime considers itself to be threatened by protests, as happened in 2016 in Venezuela, and in 2020 in Kyrgyzstan and Thailand. Meanwhile, 'temporary' emergencies can drag on for years, allowing the expansion of political power to be hidden behind concerns about national security or humanitarian assistance.

Few countries have experienced this problem to the same degree as Egypt, whose long history of emergencies and **martial law** once prompted talk of an 'endless emergency' (Reza, 2007):

Martial law: Law declared by a military government or an occupying military force, during a supposedly temporary suspension of civilian law.

- During the British occupation of Egypt, martial law was declared between 1914 and 1922, when Egypt became independent.
- It was declared again during World War II, and then again in 1948–50 as a result of the first Arab-Israeli war.
- It was declared again in 1952–56 during and after the Free Officers Revolution that brough Gamal Abdel Nasser to power.

- In 1958, a new law was promulgated on emergency powers for the government, allowing the president to declare an emergency 'whenever public security or order are threatened'. In effect, the wartime measure of martial law was converted into an ongoing tool of governance.
- The new law was put into effect until 1964, reinstituted during the Six Day War with Israel in 1967, and allowed to run until 1980.
- It was reinstituted in 1981 following the assassination of President Anwar Sadat by Islamic militants and remained in force throughout the tenure of Sadat's successor Hosni Mubarak, who cited the threat of terrorism as the explanation. During the emergency, his government suspended constitutional rights, legalized censorship, allowed detention without trial, and extended police powers, helping built the resentment that led to Mubarak's overthrow in 2011 during the Arab Spring.
- The state of emergency finally ended in May 2012, only to be reinstituted in April 2017 after bombings at Coptic Christian churches left 45 people dead. It was finally lifted in October 2021.

Although the new 2014 Egyptian constitution limited emergencies to three months and required legislative approval for renewals, amendments to the 1958 emergency law were pushed through the Egyptian parliament in April 2020 that gave President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi new powers to declare emergencies. Ostensibly, the explanation was bound up with Covid-19 and the need to deal with public health emergencies, but the amendments gave him the power to close schools, universities, courts, government facilities, and businesses, to limit public gatherings of any kind, and to control the prices of goods and services (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

A second strategy used by some authoritarian governments to bypass the constitution is to manipulate judges indirectly through recruitment, training, evaluation, promotion, and disciplinary procedures. For example, a combination of subtle and not-so-subtle means was used by the administration of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez (1999–2013) to weaken the role of the country's Supreme Tribunal of Justice (Taylor, 2014). Chávez began by issuing threats against judges and threats of non-compliance with key rulings to weaken the court's effectiveness without changing the law. Then, in 2004, the law was changed to increase the number of seats in the Court from 20 to 32, and Chávez supporters were appointed to the 12 new seats. By the time of Chávez's death in office in March 2013, a series of incremental changes had removed almost all judicial checks on the Venezuelan executive. The court even went so far in 2017 as to briefly take over the powers of the Venezuelan legislature. Although there was an immediate public outcry, the court continued to be controlled by the government of Chávez's successor – Nicolás Maduro – who could bypass the legislature whenever he felt it necessary, and faced no opposition from the court.

A third strategy for bypassing the constitution is to make use of special courts that do the regime's bidding without much pretence of judicial independence. The regular courts are left in place – offering a thin image of legal integrity to the world – while politically important cases are sent to these special courts. An example is found in Myanmar, which has made use of 'military tribunals' that may sound as though they are designed to try military personnel, but which are

in fact used to try civilians during a time of military government. Such courts functioned during the regime of General U Ne Win between 1962 and 1988, their job description being expanded so that they could eventually hear almost any offence that was deemed a threat to the military government. The tribunals have been revived in recent years, as in early 2021 when the military wrested back control of the government from civilians, martial law was declared in several parts of the country, and the tribunals were allowed to prosecute almost anyone accused of protesting against the military government.

In states with a ruling party, courts act less as a constraint on political authority than as an aid to the party in carrying out its policies. China is currently on its fourth constitution (adopted in 1982), which offers a good example of the billboard function of an authoritarian constitution. It opens with a short reminder of the history of China and the role of the people in creating a 'magnificent culture' and a 'proud revolutionary tradition'. The overthrow of 'imperialism and feudalism' during the twentieth century, it continues, resulted in 'the Chinese people' taking control and becoming 'masters of their own country'.

Article 2 emphasizes that 'all power … belongs to the people', and yet this statement is preceded in Article 1 by a stern warning that 'the leadership of the Communist Party of China is the defining feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Sabotage of the socialist system by any organization or individual is prohibited.' Further, if the people ruled, then how was a single leader – Xi Jinping – able to add his own doctrine ('Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era') to the list of other individuals (Marx, Lenin, Mao, and Deng Xiaoping) whose ideas were so important to the constitution?

MLADEN ANTONOV / Contributor

Myanmar migrants in Thailand protest the government of General Min Aung Hlaing, commander-in-chief of the Myanmar army and effectively the military dictator of the country. Myanmar's military has been accused of human rights violations, political repression, and war crimes.

Article 5 asserts that China 'shall practice law-based governance and build a socialist state under the rule of law'. In reality, the phrase *rule by law* (in the Chinese context) means exerting political control through law, rather than limiting the exercise of power. The courts are regarded as just one bureaucratic agency among others, legal judgments are not tested against the constitution, and many decisions are simply ignored. Rulings are unpublished and difficult cases are often left undecided. In contrast with democracies, legal institutions in China remain less specialized, and legal personnel less sophisticated. Trial procedures, while improving, still offer only limited protection for the innocent. The police remain largely unaccountable, political opponents are still imprisoned without trial, and party officials continue to occupy a protected position above the law. Because the party still rules, power continues to trump the constitution and human rights, while Zhang (2012) notes that political and religious rights remain dormant.

It is always important, whether reviewing democratic or authoritarian regimes, to distinguish the headline-making developments in government and politics from the underlying trends. Relatively few court decisions make the headlines in any country, and when they do it is mainly because they have had some notable effect tied to an issue that attracts public attention. Meanwhile, the routine day-to-day work of the courts, and the constitutional principles upon which they are based, go on without much public attention.

This is an argument made by Hendley (2014) in regard to Russia, for example. She points to events that have made international headlines – such as the conviction in 2012 of the punk rock group Pussy Riot after holding an anti-Putin event in a Moscow cathedral, or the repeated arrests of opposition politician Alexei Navalny (who died in jail in 2024, two years after a trial widely derided as a sham) – and notes that these and other cases have created an image of Russian law as 'an instrument used by the state to impose its will on dissenters'. She also argues, though, that they have obscured the role of law in the everyday life of Russians, who – in spite of misgivings about the weakness of judges relative to the executive – use the courts in ever-increasing numbers to resolve their disputes.

Regardless of the claims of constitutions and the work of courts, it is abundantly clear that most authoritarian regimes have a poor record on human rights. Comparative data lacks the established record of the indices we have reviewed for democracy and corruption, but the Human Freedom Index offers some useful insights. Maintained by two think-tanks from the United States and Canada, it defines human freedom as 'negative liberty or the absence of coercive constraint' and uses nearly 80 indicators, including a mixture of economic freedoms and civil liberties such as freedom of movement, religion, association, and expression. On a scale of 0 to 10, with 10 representing the most freedom, it found that the average score for countries assessed in 2020 was 6.81, and that the lowest levels were in the Middle East, North Africa, Eastern Europe, South Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. The countries with the lowest scores are shown on the right in Figure 7.5, comparing them with countries with high scores.

As the figure suggests, Zimbabwe does not fare well. Following a period of growing political conflict and economic decline, a new constitution was adopted in 2013, offering hope that life for Zimbabweans might become more secure. However, the governing party ZANU-PF – which won 72 per cent of the seats in the

Zimbabwean legislature in the 2013 elections, 66 per cent in 2018, and 63 per cent in 2023 – has dragged its feet in implementing the provisions of the constitution and addressing restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly. Media and academic freedom are restricted, opponents of the regime are routinely harassed, property rights are often ignored, the military is used to support the regime, and the courts are manipulated to suit the purposes of the governing regime. The weakness of the courts was illustrated in 2021 when they failed to block amendments to the constitution that expanded the already substantial powers of the president of Zimbabwe.

Another example of an authoritarian system with a poor human rights record is Iran. Its constitution makes noble blueprint-style statements about an Islamic Republic 'endorsed by the people of Iran on the basis of their longstanding belief in the sovereignty of truth and Quranic justice', and about the 'exalted dignity and value of man' and the independence of the judiciary. However, many activists languish in jail on political charges, women and minorities face discrimination of many kinds, and Iran has a rate of execution that is probably second only to that of China; there are many capital offences in Iran, including apostasy (abandonment of Islam) and *moharebeh* ('enmity against God'). The Iranian court system is a channel for, rather than a limitation on, power.

In summary, courts and constitutions in authoritarian regimes – whatever the claims they make about the protection of rights and the importance of the stability of the state – are often little more than facades behind which the authoritarian nature of government can play out. They bring to mind the probably fictional story of the fake villages that were built by the Russian nobleman Grigory Potemkin to impress and comfort Empress Catherine II during a journey she made to the Crimea in 1787. The term *Potemkin village* has since come to mean a hollow or false construct behind which there is something to be hidden, an idea that applies, unfortunately, to constitutions in many authoritarian regimes, as well as to legislatures and elections – see later chapters.

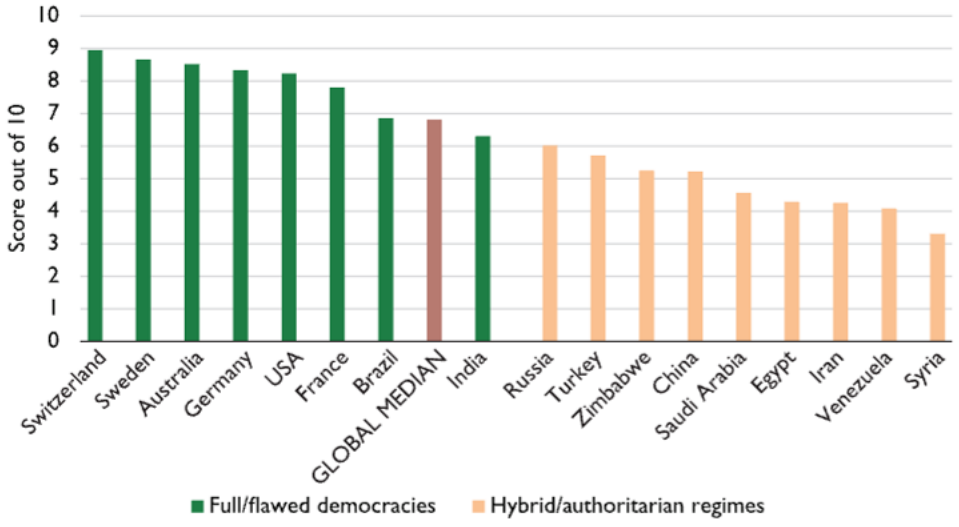

Figure 7.5 The Human Freedom Index

Source: Based on Vásquez et al. (2022). Based on data for 2020. Only 165 countries were ranked. Those unranked included Afghanistan, Cuba, North Korea, and South Sudan. For the latest information, see Cato Institute at https://www.cato.org.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Which is best: a constitution that is short and ambiguous, leaving room for interpretation, or one that is long and detailed, leaving less room for misunderstanding?
- What are the relative advantages and disadvantages of supreme courts and constitutional courts?
- Judicial restraint or judicial activism – which is best for the constitutional well-being of a state?
- What is the best way of recruiting judges, and what are the most desirable limits on their terms in office, if any?
- What are the best forms of protection to ensure the independence of judges and courts?
- Which of the four roles of constitutions in authoritarian regimes do you find most convincing?

KEY CONCEPTS

- Abstract review
- Appellate
- Bill of rights
- Cassation
- Codified constitution
- Concrete review
- Constitution
- Entrenchment
- Eternity clause
- Flexible constitution
- Institutionalism
- Institutionalization
- Judicial activism
- Judicial independence
- Judicial restraint
- Judicial review
- Judiciary
- Martial law
- New institutionalism
- Original jurisdiction
- Rigid constitution
- State of emergency
- Uncodified constitution

FURTHER READING

Giannoulopoulos, Dimitrios, and Yvonne McDermott (eds) (2023) *Judicial Independence Under Threat* (Oxford University Press). An edited collection of studies of the increasing threats faced in different countries to judicial independence from populism and other sources.

Ginsburg, Tom, and Alberto Simpser (eds) (2014) *Constitutions in Authoritarian Regimes* (Cambridge University Press). An edited collection on the design, content, and consequences of constitutions in authoritarian regimes.

Issacharoff, Samuel (2015) *Fragile Democracies: Contested Power in the Era of Constitutional Courts* (Cambridge University Press). Argues that strong constitutional courts are a powerful antidote to authoritarianism, because they help protect against external threats and the domestic consolidation of power.

Rosenfeld, Michel, and András Sajó (eds) (2013) *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Constitutional Law* (Oxford University Press). A comparative collection of studies of history, types, principles, processes, and structures of constitutions.

Smith, Rogers M., and Richard R. Beeman (eds) (2020) *Modern Constitutions* (University of Pennsylvania Press). Uses the baseline of the US constitution to compare recent constitutional developments around the world, and to assess the mounting authoritarian pressures on the rule of law.

Various authors (2009–23) *Constitutional Systems of the World* (Hart Publishing). A series of nearly three dozen books offering contextual analyses of the constitutions of countries as diverse as Australia, Brazil, France, Japan, Mexico, Russia, the UK, and the United States.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Visit **bloomsbury.pub/comparative-government-and-politics-13e** to access additional materials to support teaching and learning.

SPOTLIGHT 1
SOUTH AFRICA

PROFILE

South Africa languished for many decades under a system of institutionalized racial separation known as apartheid. This ensured privileges and opportunities for white South Africans at the expense of their black, mixed race, and Asian neighbours. In the face of growing resistance, and ostracism from much of the outside world, changes were agreed that paved the way for the first democratic elections in 1994. Much was originally expected from a country with a wealth of natural resources, but one party – the African National Congress – has won six out of the last seven electiosn, corruption is endemic, unemployment remains stubbornly high (32 per cent in 2023), many still live in poverty, and South Africa faces major public security challenges, with one of the highest per capita homicide and violent assault rates in the world. Despite being the second largest economy in Africa (after Nigeria), it has only partly realized its potential as a major regional power.

Form of government	Unitary presidential republic. State formed 1910, and most recent constitution adopted 1997.
Executive	Presidential. A president heads both the state and the government, ruling with a cabinet. The National Assembly elects the president after each general election. Presidents limited to two five-year terms.
Legislature	Bicameral Parliament: lower National Assembly (400 members) elected for renewable five-year terms, and upper National Council of Provinces with 90 members, ten appointed from each of the nine provinces.
Judiciary	The legal system mixes common and civil law. The Constitutional Court decides constitutional matters and can strike down legislation. It has 11 members appointed by the president for terms of 12 years.
Electoral system	The National Assembly is elected by proportional representation using closed party lists; half are elected from a national list and half from provincial lists.
Parties	Dominant party. The African National Congress (ANC) has dominated since the first full democratic and multi-racial election in 1994. The centrist Democratic Alliance, now the leading party in the Western Cape, forms the official opposition.
Population	60 million
Gross Domestic Product	$405 billion
Per capita GDP	$6,776
Democracy Index rating	Flawed democracy
Freedom House rating	Free
Corruption score	41/100
Human Development Index rating	High

CASE STUDY: THE CONSTITUTION OF SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa's transformation from a state based on apartheid to a more egalitarian and democratic order was one of the most remarkable political transitions of the late twentieth century. In 1996, after two years of hard bargaining between the African National Congress (ANC) and the white National Party (NP), agreement was reached on a new 109-page constitution to take effect in February 1997. For a contextual analysis, see Klug (2010).

Bloomberg / Contributor

Images of Cyril Ramaphosa, South Africa's president, on sale at the annual conference of the African National Congress, a party that has dominated the country since the end of apartheid in 1994.

The preamble begins with a recognition of 'the injustices of our past', emphasizes the importance of healing divisions, and asserts that South Africa is 'one, sovereign, democratic state', based on the value of 'human dignity, the achievement of equality … non-racialism and non-sexism'. It then – before describing the system of government – includes a lengthy bill of rights, including support for privacy, the right to peacefully demonstrate, freedom of movement, and the right to free and fair elections.

Although the new political system was built on the foundations of the old, it also involved several key changes, including an upper chamber of Parliament designed to represent the country's nine provinces, a president elected by Parliament from among its members, and an expansion of human rights. South Africa has since had seven rounds of parliamentary elections and multiple presidents, but the initial optimism for South Africa's new democracy has been tarnished by the dominance of the ANC and by corruption that has become institutionalized in the sense that the abuse of public office for private gain has become a routine part of political life.

Some have argued that the constitution should be replaced with a document that is more reflective of the needs and realities of African society, replacing the compromises that were made at the end of the apartheid era. Others argue that it is a landmark attempt to create a society based on social, economic, and political rights for all citizens, and that its true implementation has yet to be achieved (Dixon and Roux, 2018). The effects of the constitution, more than most, should be judged by what preceded it, and in that sense the achievements of the new South Africa are remarkable indeed.

Further reading

Butler, Anthony (2017) *Contemporary South Africa*, 3rd edn (Palgrave).

Dixon, Rosalind, and Theunis Roux (eds) (2018) *Constitutional Triumphs, Constitutional Disappointments: A Critical Assessment of the 1996 South African Constitution's Local and International Influence* (Cambridge University Press).

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8

Executives

CONTENTS

- Understanding executives
- Presidential executives
- Parliamentary executives
- Semi-presidential executives
- Executives in authoritarian regimes

PREVIEW

The focus of this chapter is on the top tier of leadership, and the most visible office in any system of government. Whether we are talking about presidents, prime ministers, chancellors, dictators, or despots, those who sit at the peak of the pyramid of government – the executives – typically attract the most public interest, whether opinions are positive or negative. To be sure, executives – in democracies, at least – consist not just of individual leaders but of large networks of people and institutions, including the ministers and secretaries who form the cabinet or the council of ministers. Even so, a single figure usually becomes the best-known face of government, shaping its agenda, attracting attention for its successes and failures, acting as a focus of popular domestic interest, and representing a country in its dealings with other executives.

The chapter begins with a survey of the roles of executives, distinguishing the different tasks of heads of state and heads of government. It then looks in turn at the three major forms of democratic executive: the presidential, parliamentary, and semi-presidential. It compares and contrasts their roles and powers, focusing in particular on the sub-types of parliamentary executives and the experience they have with legislative coalitions. The chapter then looks at the executives found in authoritarian systems, where leaders may seem to enjoy more power than their democratic peers, but where they also enjoy fewer formal protections of their person or their tenure in office. This inevitably affects the way they approach their positions.

HIGHLIGHTS

- The political executive has multiple roles, including making policy, overseeing its execution, providing leadership, and responding to crises.
- Executives carry out the functions of head of state and head of government, jobs that are combined in some political systems and divided in others.
- Although presidential executives come in different forms, the usual arrangement is one in which power is shared between a presidency and other branches of government.
- In parliamentary executives, the government comes out of the legislature, and the power of the executive depends heavily on the balance of party support in the legislature.
- Semi-presidential executives combine elements of the presidential and parliamentary formats. They are less common, and less thoroughly studied.
- Executives in authoritarian regimes face fewer constraints than those in democracies, as well as fewer guarantees about how long they will stay in power.

UNDERSTANDING EXECUTIVES

Ecuador (a hybrid regime) has a history of instability and change in the office of its president. Until 2008, the officeholder was limited to a single four-year term, but few actually saw out their terms thanks to political unrest, military interventions, and other problems. (One incumbent – Abdalá Bucaram, who earned the nickname the Madman Lover – was even removed in 1997 after being declared by the National Assembly to be mentally unfit to rule.) Since the passage of the country's 20th constitution in 2008, the president has been given a maximum of two four-year terms, but this did not give Guillermo Lasso – a conservative banker elected in 2021 – more opportunity to make his mark. Taking office during the Covid-19 pandemic, Lasso's economic policies and heavy-handed responses to public protests sparked impeachment proceedings. The president responded by dissolving the National Assembly, invoking a measure known as *muerte cruzada* ('mutual death'), and triggering a new election in which he did not run. Lasso was succeeded by Daniel Noboa, who – upon taking office in November 2023 – became Ecuador's youngest president at the age of 35.

The office held by Noboa is one example of the political **executive** that lies at the heart of government, providing the political leadership that forms the highest level of administration in a country. At the national level, this mainly means presidents or prime ministers, along with cabinets and government ministers. The term *executive* also applies to leaders at lower levels, such as the governors or chief ministers of states or provinces, and the mayors of towns and cities. It is also important to distinguish the temporary political executive (leaders elected or appointed to specific terms in office to make policy) from the career bureaucrats who implement policy, and the vast majority of whom are unelected, as we will see in Chapter 10.

Executive: The political institution responsible for overseeing the execution of laws and policies, and most often associated with the idea of national leadership.

The institutional approach to comparison (see *Using Theory 7*) focuses on the role of the democratic executive as a government's energizing force, setting priorities, mobilizing support, reacting to problems, resolving crises, making decisions, and overseeing their execution. Chief political executives are not only elected but are subject to rules and realities which limit their power: not only must they face re-election, but their performance is measured in public opinion surveys and media coverage. The scope of authoritarian executives, meanwhile, is restricted not so much by the constitution or public opinion as by political manipulation, and the office of the executive tends to be more fluid, shaped by informal relationships rather than formal rules. As a result, it must be understood using a variety of additional theoretical approaches.

Executives come in four main types: presidential, parliamentary, semi-presidential, and authoritarian. All four types can be understood as contrasting methods for assigning, dividing, and controlling executive authority. In democratic presidential and semi-presidential regimes, the constitution sets up a system of checks and balances between executive, legislative, and judicial institutions. In parliamentary systems, the executive comes out of the legislature and its survival depends on party numbers and keeping the confidence of the legislature, its freedom of action often limited by the need to sustain a coalition between parties that have agreed to share the task of

governing. In authoritarian regimes, meanwhile, executives are subject to fewer constraints.

Having said all this, though, there are no fixed and universal templates for any of these types. They change over time, and vary within and between different countries, according to constitutional rules, the **leadership** style of office-holders (see *Using Theory 8*), and the changing balance between the executive and the legislature. Some states fit firmly within one of these types, while others have features that are a blend of types, even slowly moving from one to another as the powers of offices change. The presidency of Turkey, for example, has evolved from a figurehead into a position with strong political powers, while the Supreme Leader of Iran – who governs in conjunction with an elected president – fits none of the four executive types.

Leadership: The capacity to lead by motivating or inspiring others to achieve common goals, ideally voluntarily and willingly, but otherwise by threats and force.

In coming to grips with the different political roles of democratic executives (see Figure 8.1), we first need to appreciate that the executive is more than the individual who leads the government of a country or a province or a city, and is actually a collective body consisting of multiple people and offices. Presidents and prime ministers may be the most visible members of an executive, but they do not govern alone, and instead rely heavily on advisers, ministers, bureaucrats, and independent agencies. Executives also go beyond making policy and providing leadership, and need to work with the other parts of government in order to govern.

We also need to distinguish between two different dimensions of the work of executives:

- A **head of state** is the representative of the state, and is expected to rise above politics and to work in the general interests of all the citizens of a state. In democratic regimes, much of what the head of state does is symbolic: for example, hosting visiting leaders, engaging in foreign state visits, and providing leadership in times of war or national crisis. The lines

Head of state: The figurehead or ceremonial leader of a state, who may be elected or appointed, or – in the case of monarchs – may inherit the position.

Role	*Features*
Representation	Representing the interests of voters in government, and of the state in dealings with other governments.
Execution	Overseeing, through the bureaucracy, the execution of laws and policies, and the maintenance of law and order.
Making policy	Defining the policy priorities and interests of government.
Leadership	Providing the overall direction taken by a government and a state.
Appointments	Making appointments to other senior positions in government.
Security	Defending and preserving the unity and integrity of the state, in the face of domestic and external threats.
Crisis response	Leading the response of the government to political, security, public safety, and natural crises.

Figure 8.1 Executives in democratic regimes

USING THEORY 8

LEADERSHIP THEORIES

Leadership skills are critical to the performance of executives. A president or a prime minister who struggles to provide direction will struggle to govern, while one who is able to inspire others to follow and to pursue a common set of goals will likely achieve much more. Defining leadership is not easy, though; it is a quality that we tend to know when we see it in action, and whose absence is also often clear, but explaining the differences between strong and weak leadership is another matter altogether, particularly as the definition of leadership has changed over time (Northouse, 2022).

In spite of the obviously important role of leadership in understanding government and politics, and the long history of interest in political leadership that dates back at least to Plato, political science has been remarkably lax in developing theories of leadership. They were used in the decades after World War II, but then were overtaken by an interest in other theoretical approaches such as structuralism and rational choice, and have only seen a revival in recent years. It was not that long ago that Peele (2005) made the case for political scientists and students of leadership to engage with each other more extensively, while it was more recently that Helms (2012) made the case for studying political leadership comparatively.

The possibilities are reflected in the numerous theories of leadership that have come out of the corporate world, including the following:

- *Behavioural or style theory*: Focuses on how leaders behave and assumes that their traits can be copied or avoided. The best predictor of leadership success, in this approach, is studying the actions of a leader.
- *Contingency or situational theory*: Studies the context within which leaders function, and notes that the best leaders can adjust to changing circumstances.
- *Great Man theory*: Argues that good leaders are born, and achieve leadership because of innate skills and traits that cannot be taught or learned.
- *Management or transactional theory*: Focuses on the abilities of leaders to supervise and organize, using rewards and punishments to achieve their goals.
- *Participative theory*: In this view, leaders prefer to have others involved in decision-making, and act mainly as facilitators.
- *Power theory*: Looks at ways in which leaders use power and influence to get things done.
- *Relationship theory*: Emphasizes the manner in which leaders focus on their interactions with others.

Understanding the rules of leadership, and understanding how leaders come to power, work with other institutions, and lose their power are all important parts of the study of political systems. Clearly, though, political science still has much to learn from the corporate world.

between the figurehead and the politician are sometimes unclear, though, particularly in presidential systems or absolute monarchies, where one person is both head of state and head of government.

Head of government: The elected leader of a government, who comes to office because of the support of voters who identify with their party and platform.

- A **head of government** is the political leader of a government. In this capacity, the executive is either elected or is appointed by elected politicians, or – in authoritarian regimes – comes to power through other and sometimes less transparent means. Heads of government usually make little effort to hide their partisan preferences, and they are more interested in keeping the support of their party, voters, and supporters than in representing the broader interests of all citizens (whatever they might say about the national interest).

In presidential executives such as the United States, Mexico, and Nigeria, the two roles are combined in one office, mingling the symbolic and the political. In parliamentary systems, by contrast, the roles of fulfilled by two different people, making it easier to differentiate the symbolic and the political. While the head of government is usually a prime minister (or chancellor in Austria and Germany), heads of state take one of two forms, coming to office through different means (see Table 8.1):

Republic: A political system in which all members of the government are either elected or are appointed by elected officials. In other words, there is no monarch.

- In **republics**, non-executive presidents are elected either through a popular vote (as in Ireland), by parliament (as in Israel), or by a special electoral

Table 8.1: Selecting heads of state in parliamentary systems

Country	Head of state	Method of selection	Tenure
Australia, Canada, Jamaica, New Zealand	British monarch, represented by Governor-General	Governor-General nominated by prime minister or government and confirmed by British monarch.	At monarch's pleasure
Austria*	President	Direct popular election by a two-round system.	6 years
Germany*	President	Election by a joint *Bundestag* and *Land* convention.	5 years
India*	President	Election by a college of federal and state assemblies.	5 years
Israel*	President	Election by a secret ballot of parliament.	7 years
Italy*	President	Election by a joint session of parliament and regional representatives.	7 years
Japan	Emperor	Heredity (eldest male).	Life
Malaysia	Supreme head of state	Elected (from among rulers of the nine Malay states).	5 years
Spain	Monarch	Heredity (eldest child).	Life
Sweden	Monarch	Heredity (eldest child).	Life
UK	Monarch	Heredity (eldest child).	Life

* *Republics.*

college, the latter often consisting (as in Germany) of the national legislature along with representatives from regional or local government.

- More rarely, heads of state are monarchs who have inherited their positions. Seven European countries (Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom), along with three principalities (Andorra, Monaco, and Liechtenstein) and a grand duchy (Luxembourg) have a **constitutional monarchy**. Meanwhile, Malaysia's supreme head of state provides a rare example of an elected monarch, the job rotating for five-year terms among the rulers of the nine Malay states that have hereditary royal rulers.

Constitutional monarchy: A state headed by a monarch whose political powers are severely limited by constitutional rules. Stands in contrast with a ruling or absolute monarch (see Chapter 5).

In semi-presidential systems, the division of roles is more complicated. There is both a president and a prime minister, but while the job of the prime minister rarely spills over into the duties of the head of state, the president straddles the two offices. In instances where presidents are popular and have strong support in the legislature, they will function both as head of state and as head of government. Where they are less popular, or working with legislatures in which their party does not have a clear majority, presidents will find themselves focusing more on the duties of a head of state, while the prime minister is more clearly the head of government.

Although most national executives are still dominated by men, the number of women being elected to the highest offices has grown, such that when a woman is elected as a president or prime minister it is much less noteworthy than it once was. Since the election in July 1960 of the world's first female head of government of the modern era – Sirimavo Bandaranaike, prime minister of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) – more than four dozen countries have had women as national executives; see Table 8.2 for some examples.

Antonio Masiello / Contributor

Two of the growing numbers of women who have broken through to the highest levels of executive power: Giorgia Meloni, Prime Minister of Italy, and Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Bangladesh, during an official visit by the latter to Italy.

Table 8.2: Female executives (selected)

Country	Name	In office
Sri Lanka	Sirimavo Bandaranaike	1960–65, 1970–77, 1994–2000
India	Indira Gandhi	1966–77, 1980–84
Israel	Golda Meir	1969–74
Britain	Margaret Thatcher	1979–90
	Theresa May	2016–19
	Liz Truss	2022
Dominica	Eugenia Charles	1980–95
Norway	Gro Harlem Brundtland	1981, 1986–89, 1990–96
Philippines	Corazon Aquino	1986–92
	Gloria Macapagal Arroyo	2001–10
Pakistan	Benazir Bhutto	1988–90, 1993–96
Poland	Hanna Suchoka	1992–93
	Ewa Kopacz	2014–15
	Beata Szydło	2015–17
Bangladesh	Sheikh Hasina	1996–2001, 2009–24
New Zealand	Jenny Clark	1999–2008
	Jacinda Ardern	2017–23
Indonesia	Megawati Sukarnoputri	2001–04
Mozambique	Luisa Diogo	2004–10
Germany	Angela Merkel	2005–21
Chile	Michelle Bachelet	2006–10, 2014–18
Liberia	Ellen Johnson Sirleaf	2006–18
Argentina	Cristina Fernández de Kirchner	2007–15
Iceland	Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir*	2009–13
	Katrín Jakobsdóttir	2017–24
Australia	Julia Gillard	2010–13
Brazil	Dilma Rousseff	2011–16
South Korea	Park Geun-hye	2013–16
Myanmar	Aung San Suu Kyi	2016–21
Barbados	Mia Mottley	2018–
Tanzania	Samia Suluhu Hassan	2021–

** World's first openly lesbian head of government.*

List includes only elected heads of government or executive presidents. Excludes heads of state.

Globally, the number of women holding ministerial positions in government has also grown, with several countries – including Finland, France, Iceland, Norway, Spain, South Africa, Sweden, and Switzerland – having achieved, or coming close to achieving, gender parity in senior levels of government. While many women ministers are often still found in the areas of education and social policy traditionally perceived to be associated more with women's interests, they have also moved into more powerful fields such as defence, finance, and foreign policy (Paxton et al., 2021). Despite this progress, the glass remains well over half empty: in a large majority of countries, most ministers and legislators are still men (see Chapter 9).

PRESIDENTIAL EXECUTIVES

The world has many presidents, but it is important to appreciate that they are not all equal. At one end of the scale, a president in a parliamentary system is usually a figurehead: someone without executive powers who serves mainly as a ceremonial head of state. In the middle of the scale, a democratic **presidential executive** is led by a president elected to the office with an ideologically driven agenda, fulfilling a central political role. At the other end of the scale, many authoritarian regimes have presidents who have managed to accumulate so much power that they have become quasi-monarchical dictators, making the presidency the only political institution in these regimes that really matters; see later in this chapter for details. Even within these three types there are multiple sub-types, leading Mezey (2013) to conclude that 'presidentialism is more than simply a constitutional category; it includes a set of public perceptions, political actions, as well as formal and informal political power arrangements'.

Presidential executive: An arrangement in which the executive and the legislature are separately and directly elected, and have separate powers and responsibilities.

In its democratic form, a presidential executive is one in which a single person is elected to head the government, overseeing the bureaucracy, and working alongside an independent legislature (see Table 8.3). The president serves both as head of state and as head of government, and makes appointments to other key government institutions, such as the courts and the leadership of major government departments, although some of the appointments may be subject to confirmation by the legislature. Both president and legislature are elected for fixed terms, the president cannot usually dissolve the legislature (there are some exceptions), and the legislature can usually only remove the president through mechanisms such as impeachment (see Chapter 9). Since neither body can normally bring down the other, and there is a separation of powers, each institution has some autonomy.

Presidential executives have strengths and weaknesses. Among the strengths:

- The president's fixed term provides continuity in the executive, avoiding the potential instability of early elections called in parliamentary systems.
- Elected by the country as a whole, the president can rise above the narrower regional and local interests represented in the legislature.
- A president provides a natural symbol of national unity, offering a familiar face for domestic and international audiences alike.
- Since a presidential system necessarily involves a separation of powers, it encourages the kind of limited government discussed in Chapter 4.

Table 8.3: The presidential executive

■ Elected president steers the government and makes senior appointments.
■ Fixed terms of offices for the president and the legislature.
■ Presidents are restricted to a specified number of terms in office; usually one or two.
■ Little overlap in membership between the executive and the legislature.
■ President serves as head of government as well as head of state.
■ Examples: Indonesia, Nigeria, Philippines, South Korea, United States, most of Latin America.

Among the weaknesses of presidential executives:

- Only one party can win the presidency; everyone else loses. Unless the president is able to reach across party lines, or is limited by opposition parties in the legislature, it is a winner-take-all arrangement.
- Deadlock can arise when executives and legislatures disagree, leaving government sometimes unable to address pressing problems.
- Presidential systems lack the rallying-point for opposition provided by the leaders of non-ruling parties in parliamentary systems.
- Presidents often find themselves in a political minority, having to work with fragmented legislatures in which their party holds only a minority of the seats, and, in effect, having to govern in a coalition (see Chaisty et al., 2018).

Presidential executives are found most often in the Americas, where the United States is a representative case (see Han, 2017, and Edwards et al., 2018). In addition to a general obligation to oversee the execution of laws, the US president is given explicit duties (such as commander-in-chief) that have been interpreted over time as giving presidents additional implied powers, such as the power to issue executive orders, statements, and proclamations. At the same time, US presidents often find their hands tied, because they share important powers with Congress:

- The president may be commander-in-chief, but only Congress can declare war.
- The president can make government appointments and sign treaties, but only with the consent of the Senate (the upper chamber of Congress).
- The president can veto legislation, but Congress can override the veto.
- Congress, not the president, controls the purse strings.
- The deep political divisions that have come to the United States in recent decades can make it more difficult for presidents and Congress to work together.

The norm in a presidential system is for the president to be elected separately from the legislature; as an example, see *Spotlight 8* on Brazil at the end of this chapter. In these cases, presidential survival (if not success) is independent of party numbers in the legislature. One exception to the rule is found in South Africa, where the president is elected by members of the legislature rather than in a direct national vote. The president can also be removed from office through a legislative vote, as nearly happened in 2018 when President Jacob Zuma – facing the loss of a vote of confidence in the wake of charges of corruption – resigned the office. Determining the political impact of this rare format (found in only two other countries: Botswana and Myanmar) has been complicated by the dominance in post-apartheid South Africa of a single party, the African National Congress. Were legislative elections to produce no clear majority party, it would be interesting to see how the election of the president would unfold.

Separation of powers: An arrangement in which executive, legislature, and judiciary are given distinct but complementary sets of powers, such that none can govern alone and that all should, ideally, govern together.

One of the defining features of the democratic presidential executive is the **separation of powers**: executives lead and execute, legislatures make law, and courts adjudicate. While there is an overlap in practice, the focus of responsibilities is mainly clear, and is typically reinforced by a separation of personnel.

Neither the president nor members of the cabinet can sit in the legislature, creating further distance between the two institutions. Similarly, legislators must resign their seats if they want to serve in the government, meaning that the president's ability to buy members' votes with the promise of a job is self-limiting.

The powers of presidents are also shaped and limited by their terms in office. Most are elected for a maximum of two terms of either four or five years each, requiring them to stand for re-election after their first term, and placing a limit on how long they are given to achieve their goals. Others, though, have longer terms, or unlimited terms, or shorter terms, or limited consecutive terms, or single terms (see Table 8.4), significantly altering the scope of their jobs and the degree to which they can shape government in the time they are given.

PARLIAMENTARY EXECUTIVES

In contrast to presidential systems, where the chief executive is separate from the legislature and independently elected, the **parliamentary executive** is organically linked to the legislature. This is because the prime minister is normally the leader of the largest party in the legislature (or leader of one of the parties in the governing coalition), usually continues to hold a seat in the legislature while also running the country, works in conjunction with a separate head of state, and is subject neither to a separate election nor to term limits (see Table 8.5). Most parliamentary heads of government are prime ministers, but the equivalent in Austria and Germany is the *Bundeskanzler* (Chancellor), in Denmark and Sweden the *Statsminister* (Minister of State), in Hungary the *miniszterelnök* (minister-president), in Ireland the *Taoiseach* (chief or leader), in Israel the *Rosh HaMemshala* (the Head of the Government), and in Spain the *Presidente del Gobierno* (President of the Government).

Parliamentary executive: An arrangement in which the executive emerges from the legislature, remains accountable to it, and must maintain a working legislative majority in order to remain in office.

There are several other important differences between presidential and parliamentary executives. First, as we saw earlier, many parliamentary systems have

Table 8.4: Term limits on presidential executives

Term	Examples	Term	Examples
Unlimited, 7 years	Cameroon	2 x 4 years	Ecuador, Ghana, Nigeria, USA
2 x 7 years	Burundi, Equatorial Guinea	Unlimited non-consecutive, 4 years	Chile, Costa Rica
2 x 6 years	Egypt, Liberia, Russia	Unlimited 4 years, no more than 2 consecutive	Argentina, Brazil
Unlimited, 5 years	China, Bolivia, Uganda	1 x 6 years	Mexico, Mongolia, Philippines
Unlimited non-consecutive, 5 years	Peru, Uruguay	1 x 5 years	Paraguay
2 x 5 years	Algeria, Cuba, France, Kenya, Turkey, South Africa	1 x 4 years	Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras

Note: In authoritarian states such as Russia, the limits often exist only on paper.

Table 8.5: The parliamentary executive

■ Prime minister (or equivalent) is normally head of the governing party or coalition.
■ Governments emerge from the legislature and the prime minister can be dismissed from office by losing a legislative majority or a vote of confidence.
■ Executives can serve an unlimited number of terms in office.
■ The executive is collegial, taking the form of a cabinet (or council of ministers) in which the prime minister is traditionally first among equals.
■ Prime minister is head of government, working with a separate non-political head of state.
■ Examples: most of Europe and Caribbean, Australia, Canada, India, Japan, New Zealand, Pakistan.

presidents, but these are offices with mainly symbolic roles rather than with the kind of political power wielded by presidential executives. Second, while prime ministers make appointments to other key government institutions, these are rarely subject to confirmation by the legislature, as is the case with presidential executives. Third, in contrast to most presidents, prime ministers can be removed from office mid-term as the result of losing a vote of confidence (see Chapter 9 for details), and can call new elections before the full term of a legislature is up. Fourth, while many presidential executives are found in authoritarian regimes, the number of authoritarian parliamentary executives is rare; among the few examples are Cambodia, Iraq, Pakistan, and Thailand.

Perhaps the most important difference is that the power of the executive in a parliamentary system depends on the party balance in the legislature following elections. There are three possible outcomes:

Majority governments

In these cases, one party wins a clear majority over all the others, and the leader of that party normally becomes the prime minister. Assuming that they are able to exert tight discipline over members of the party in the legislature, the prime ministers of majority governments are in a strong position. This has often been the case in Britain, for example, where the single member plurality electoral system (see Chapter 15) usually gives a working majority in the House of Commons to a single party, allowing the prime minister to appoint a cabinet made up exclusively of parliamentary colleagues from the same party. Because the governing party spans the cabinet and the legislature, domination of the parliamentary agenda is usually guaranteed. At the same time, prime ministers have no choice but to pursue their platforms in the face of resistance from the major opposition party, whose leader is formally the Leader of the Opposition, and keeps the pressure on the prime minister while being a prime minister-in-waiting.

Coalition government: An arrangement in which the government is formed through an agreement involving two or more political parties which divide government posts between them.

Coalition governments

In these cases, no one party wins a clear majority, obliging two or more parties – usually with adjacent positions on the ideological spectrum – to govern together. In order to do this, they must reach an agreement on

which party leader becomes prime minister, and on how to distribute jobs for ministers among participating parties. The success of this arrangement depends on the extent to which the coalition partners reach a deal suitable to each, and the number of parties involved. Majority coalitions (where two parties control a majority of seats) are the most stable and durable, while coalitions involving more and occasionally smaller partners will have less stability, and minority coalitions in which the partner parties lack a majority are potentially the least stable.

In some cases, coalitions are promised or arranged before an election is held, helping voters to make a more informed judgement about the likely consequences of their voting choices. Most often, though, coalitions are worked out after an election, with the outgoing government remaining in place as a caretaker while negotiations are under way. Agreements are usually reached in a matter of days, but the more complex negotiations take longer. In 2010–11, Belgium set a record of 541 days (18 months) for a new government to be formed because of deep divisions in the Chamber of Representatives, where 11 parties won seats. Belgium broke its own record in 2018–20 when it faced similar problems and took 652 days to form a new government.

Coalition governments are the norm in most of continental Europe, but their records vary. Denmark has not had a majority government since 1909, and has mainly managed well on minority coalitions since the 1980s. In Germany, grand coalitions involving the two major parties (the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats) are not unusual. In Italy, meanwhile, unstable coalitions made up of multiple parties often lead to frequent changes in leadership (see Chapter 9 for more details).

Minority governments

In these cases, no party wins a majority after an election, and agreements among them are hard to reach, leaving one party to govern as a minority or two to govern as a minority coalition. The latter happened, for example, in Sweden in 2014, when the Social Democrats and the Greens (having won 38 per cent of the vote in the general election, and 39 per cent of the seats in the Riksdag) formed one of the weakest minority coalitions ever seen in a country where coalition government is usual. It could only govern effectively so long as it had the informal support of other parties in the Riksdag. The position of the governing coalition barely improved after the 2018 elections, even with the addition of the socialist Left Party. The challenges continued after the 2022 election, the only difference being that a leftist minority government based around the Social Democrats was replaced by a right-wing minority government based around the centrist Moderate party.

While coalitions are part of Swedish political culture, they are not part of political culture in Canada. In 2015, the Liberal Party of Justin Trudeau swept to victory with a new majority and was able to govern alone. By the time of the 2019 elections, however, Trudeau was facing ethics questions and declining popularity, and the Liberals lost their majority. Trudeau formed a minority government with support (but not a formal coalition) from other parties, and did the

same after the September 2021 election (see Chapter 14). In 2019 and 2021, a party rejected by two-thirds of voters found itself twice controlling government and the executive in one of the world's pre-eminent democracies.

Cabinets

Cabinet: A body consisting of the heads of the major government departments. Sometimes known as a council of ministers. More important in parliamentary than in presidential systems.

Another key feature of parliamentary government is the **cabinet**, or the council of ministers. Although cabinets are also found in presidential executives, they are rarely as strong or used so often by the president for policymaking while their core role in parliamentary executives often leads to government by committee. The cabinet is the main point of contact between the government and the bureaucracy, and can be the launch-pad (or graveyard) for those with aspirations to become prime minister. Most government ministers are also members of the legislature, although in some countries – such as Sweden – this so-called dual mandate is not allowed.

The dynamic of the relationship between prime ministers, cabinets, and ministers produces three different models of parliamentary government, summarized in Table 8.6. The first model is *prime ministerial government*, where the prime minister is more clearly in charge, and the guiding principle is hierarchy rather than collegiality. An example of this is found in Germany, which has an arrangement known as a 'chancellor democracy' in which the Bundestag (Germany's lower house) appoints the chancellor, and accountability to the Bundestag is mainly through the chancellor's office (Langenbacher, 2022). The chancellor answers to parliament, while ministers answer to the chancellor. The strong position of Germany's chief executive derives from the Basic Law (the German constitution) which says that the 'chancellor shall determine, and be responsible for, the general policy guidelines'.

In some cases, there have been concerns that the office of prime minister has become so powerful that it has been 'presidentialized', rising above the kind of collegiality usually associated with parliamentary government. Where this happens, it is usually thanks in part to the greater media exposure of prime ministers (who might have communications offices designed to ensure greater public coverage of their policies), the growing international role of chief executives, and the emerging need for policy coordination as governance becomes more complex (Poguntke and Webb, 2004). This trend has raised new questions about the most effective delineation of executive powers (see *Exploring Problems 8*).

Table 8.6: Models of parliamentary government

Type	Features	Examples
Prime ministerial	Prime minister is dominant figure, dealing directly with individual ministers. Ministers are followers.	Germany, UK
Cabinet	Discussion in cabinet determines overall policy. Ministers are team players.	Finland
Ministerial	Individual ministers operate with little direction from the prime minister or cabinet. Ministers are leaders.	Italy, Japan, Netherlands

Note: None of these features is institutionalized or constitutionalized, and the models can change over time.

EXPLORING PROBLEMS 8

WHAT IS THE MOST EFFECTIVE DESIGN FOR AN EXECUTIVE?

Societies need leaders, who need to have enough authority and power to do their jobs, but not so much that they become dictators, and not so little that they find themselves hamstrung. By comparing the recent performance of executives, we can find plenty of examples of those who have too much power (the leaders of China, North Korea, and Russia come to mind), but we can also find plenty of examples of those who are routinely working with one arm tied behind their backs (the leaders of Israel, Italy, and Japan come to mind).

In this chapter, different kinds of executive are described and compared, but what do the comparisons tell us about the ideal arrangement for executive power? The rules of office are only one part of the story, and the personality and skills of leaders should not be forgotten, nor should simple luck (good or bad). In this sense, it is worth remembering the words of Malvolio, a character in Shakespeare's play *Twelfth Night*: 'Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.' It is also worth appreciating that the terms *great* and *greatness* can be substituted in this quote with the terms *weak* and *weakness*.

The key point here, referring back to some of the theories of leadership discussed in *Using Theory 8*, is that leaders will bring different abilities to their jobs, and also need to be ready to have greatness or weakness thrust upon them if they are called to govern during times of crisis. Context is critical, and while the effectiveness of executives might be defined – most of the time – as an ability simply to keep a system running, on other occasions there will be greater demands that might require greater leadership, and perhaps a greater share of the responsibility for governing. The challenge of responding to the Covid-19 pandemic offers a recent example.

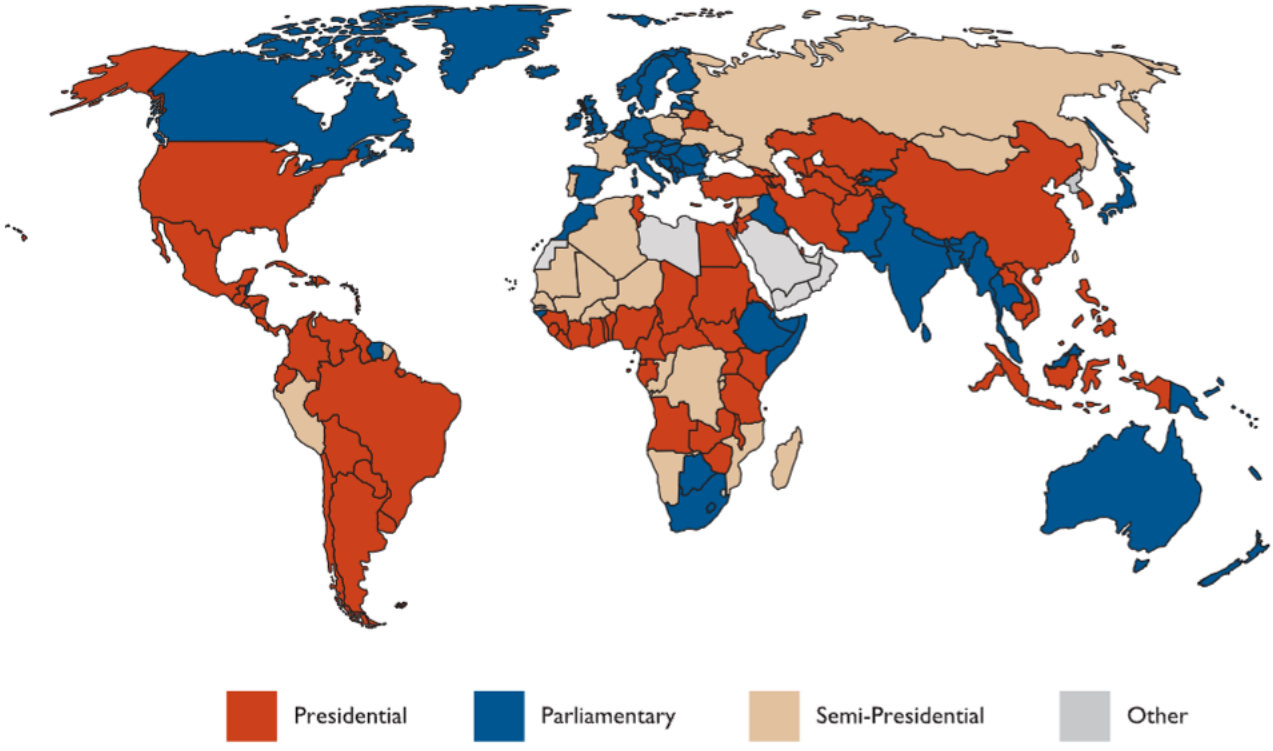
Looking at the different types of executive outlined in this chapter, consider these questions:

- Is it more effective to have separated executives and legislatures (the presidential executive), to combine the two positions (the parliamentary executive), or to divide the executive function between two institutions (the semi-presidential executive)?
- To what extent are the functions of executives driven by the political culture of different societies, and differing expectations about whether executives should lead or should simply govern?
- Which of these models is most likely to allow leaders to lead without accumulating too much power?

The second model is *cabinet government*, where prime ministers and ministers work more as a team, and which has the advantage of encouraging more deliberation and collective leadership than occurs in prime ministerial government, or a presidential executive. The model works best in smaller countries; in many larger countries, the number and complexity of decisions means that they cannot all be settled around the cabinet table. Finland provides a good case of cabinet government at work: by law, the Finnish State Council (the cabinet) has extensive decision-making authority, prime ministers are mainly chairs of Council meetings, and it is at these meetings that decisions are reached and compromises made. Meanwhile, both the prime minister and individual ministers are constrained by Finland's complex multi-party coalitions.

In the third model – *ministerial government* – ministers operate with less direction from either prime minister or cabinet (except in coalitions, where they routinely find themselves limited by the demands of the coalition agreement (Moury, 2013)). In the Netherlands, for example, the prime minister does not appoint, dismiss, or reshuffle ministers. Cabinet members serve with, but not under, the government's formal leader. In these conditions, the prime minister's status is diminished, with ministers owing more loyalty to their party than to either the prime minister or the cabinet. The chief executive is less a chief or an executive than a skilled conciliator. In India's once frequent multi-party coalitions, too, open defiance of the prime minister has been far from unknown (Mitra, 2017).

Map 8.1 Executive types



SEMI-PRESIDENTIAL EXECUTIVES

Semi-presidential executive: An arrangement in which an elected president co-exists with an appointed prime minister and separately elected legislature.

The third major form of executive is a combination of the presidential and the parliamentary, producing a distinct system with its own characteristics, advantages, and disadvantages. In semi-presidential systems (otherwise known as dual executives) there is both an elected president *and* a prime minister and cabinet accountable to the legislature. The president is directly elected, acts as head of state, and shares the role of head of government with a prime minister who is usually appointed by the president but must have the support of a majority in the legislature. The president usually has an oversight role and responsibility for foreign and economic affairs, and can use emergency powers if needed, while the prime minister is responsible for most day-to-day domestic government (see summary in Table 8.7).

Curiously, this is one of the least studied of the major forms of executive, despite the fact that it is used in about two dozen countries; see Elgie (2011) for the only relatively recent full-length study of semi-presidentialism, and Carrier (2016) and Brunclik and Kubát (2019) for studies of semi-presidentialism in Russia and Eastern Europe. Although Raunio and Sedelius (2020) argue that semi-presidentialism is 'the most common constitutional arrangement in Europe', they include in their definition of semi-presidentialism multiple countries with weak presidencies that are usually thought of as parliamentary executives, including Austria, Iceland, and Ireland.

Much like parliamentary executives, there are sub-types of semi-presidentialism, depending on the relative powers of the president and prime minister:

- In a *premier-presidential system* (such as France or Poland), the president is elected in a popular vote, and selects a prime minister who heads a cabinet, and the legislature has sole power to dismiss the prime minister and the cabinet.
- In a *presidential-parliamentary system* (such as Russia), the president is also elected in a popular vote, but the prime minister and the cabinet answer to both the president and the legislature.

In cases where the president's party or coalition has a majority in the legislature, the power advantage lies with the president; the prime minister and the cabinet both follow the president's lead, and the prime minister promotes the

Table 8.7: The semi-presidential executive

■ Combines an elected president and an appointed prime minister.
■ President usually appoints the prime minister and can dissolve the legislature.
■ President serves a limited number of fixed-length terms.
■ Prime minister and cabinet are accountable to both the president and the legislature.
■ President serves as head of state and shares the responsibilities of being head of government with the prime minister.
■ Examples: France, Mongolia, Peru, Poland, Russia, Sri Lanka, Ukraine, several former French colonies in Africa.

president's programme in the legislature. However, when voters give an opposition party or coalition a majority in the legislature, the president has no choice but to work with the opposition in an arrangement known as **cohabitation**. The president will usually have to confirm a prime minister from the opposition, and while the prime minister must cooperate with the president in the national interest, both leaders take part in what is, in effect, a grand coalition. An ambitious prime minister can also use the position to build the foundations for later contesting the presidency.

Cohabitation: An arrangement found in semi-presidential systems when the presidency is held by a member of one party and the legislature is controlled by another party.

France is the archetype of the semi-presidential executive (see Bell and Gaffney, 2013). In an effort to move away from the unstable Fourth Republic, which had seen 23 prime ministers in its short 12-year life (1946–58), the constitution of the Fifth Republic was designed so as to create a presidency fit for the dominating presence of its first occupant, Charles de Gaulle (in office 1959–69). Powers in France are divided as follows:

- The president is seen as guarantor of national independence and the constitution, heads the armed forces, negotiates treaties, calls referendums, presides over the Council of Ministers, dissolves the National Assembly (but cannot veto legislation), appoints (but cannot dismiss) the prime minister, and appoints other ministers on the recommendation of the prime minister and dismisses them.
- Prime ministers are concerned mainly with domestic affairs (dismissed by de Gaulle as including such mundane matters as 'the price of milk'). Appointed by the president but accountable to the National Assembly, the prime minister formally appoints ministers and coordinates their day-to-day work, operating within the president's style and tone. The ability of the assembly to force the prime minister and the Council of Ministers to resign after a vote of censure (see Chapter 9) provides the parliamentary component of the semi-presidential executive.

Everyone's job in the French system is made easier when the same party controls both branches of government, as in 2017 when President Emmanuel Macron's party and its ally won a substantial majority in the National Assembly. Occasionally, however, France has gone through a period of cohabitation, as in 1986–88 when the socialist president François Mitterrand had to share power with the conservative Prime Minister Jacques Chirac, and in 1997–2002 when Chirac – by then president – had to share power with the socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin.

Beneath the president and prime minister, the government's day-to-day political work in a semi-presidential system is carried out by senior ministers, but the council of ministers is less significant than the cabinet in parliamentary systems. The work of the council involves more ritual than discussion, ministers are more autonomous because they often come to their job with a background in their given policy area, and interventions by the prime minister and the president are often to resolve disputes, rather than to impose an overall agenda.

One notable feature of semi-presidential systems is that they are found both in democracies and in authoritarian regimes. The primary example of the latter is Russia, where Vladimir Putin – president from 1999 to 2008 and again since 2012 – has exploited the nature of semi-presidentialism to his own ends. In addition to the standard qualities of a directly elected president coexisting with a prime minister who is nominated by the president and approved by the Duma (the lower chamber of the legislature), Putin has had a wide array of impressive powers:

- He is head of state, commander-in-chief, and the guarantor of the constitution.
- He can suspend the decisions of other state bodies, issue decrees, and remove ministers without the consent of the Duma.
- He is charged – according to the constitution – with 'defining the basic directions of the domestic and foreign policy of the state', and with 'ensuring the coordinated functioning and collaboration of bodies of state power'.

Putin has gone further by eliminating meaningful opposition and working within the constitution to maintain control. He had no choice but to step down as president upon the completion of his two terms in 2008, but he continued to hold on to power through the cynical means of becoming prime minister to a weak president, Dmitry Medvedev, who was little more than a placeholder

DMITRY ASTAKHOV / Contributor

President Vladimir Putin (right) and his prime minister Mikhail Mishustin (left) arrive for a cabinet meeting. Putin has manipulated his office to make the presidency the far more powerful of the two positions.

Table 8.8: Comparing executives

Characteristic	Presidential	Parliamentary	Semi-presidential	Authoritarian
Method of election?	Direct, whole country.	Indirect via legislature.	President: direct, whole country. Prime minister: indirect.	President: direct, whole country. Monarchs are unelected.
Separate head of state?	No.	Yes.	No.	No.
Does executive serve in legislature?	No.	Yes.	Prime minister only, not president.	No.
Separation of powers?	Yes.	No.	To some extent.	To limited extent.
Fixed terms in office?	Yes.	No.	President only.	Yes, but no limits on number of terms.
Means for dismissal from office?	End of term, loss of presidential election, impeachment, resignation.	Loss of legislative election, loss of vote of confidence, loss of party leadership, resignation.	President: end of term, loss of presidential election, impeachment, resignation. Prime minister: loss of legislative election, loss of vote of confidence, resignation.	Loss of political support; removal by force; death in the case of monarchs.
Role of cabinet?	More marginal and individualistic.	More central and collective.	More marginal and individualistic.	Marginal.
Can executive work with legislature controlled by another party?	Yes, but weakened.	Only in case of minority government.	Yes, but weakened.	Yes, but unlikely to happen.

awaiting Putin's successful return in 2012. By then, the term of the president had been increased from four years to six, so Putin was able to further strengthen his grip before sailing to an easy and predictable victory in the 2018 presidential election. He went a step further in 2020 by overseeing a national referendum that 'reset' his terms in office, allowing him to run again in 2024 without taking the necessary break, and potentially remaining as president until 2036. For all these changes, the Russian version of semi-presidentialism is often known as super presidentialism.

EXECUTIVES IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

In April 2021, the long-time president of Chad – Idriss Déby – took direct command of Chadian forces fighting against rebels intent on overthrowing his government. A former military officer, who had himself come to power in 1990 after leading a rebellion against incumbent president Hissène Habré, Déby had just a week before been re-elected to a sixth term in office at the age of 68. His 31 years in power had seen Chad became one of the most repressive and impoverished countries in the world, with Déby's government facing repeated dissent and attempted rebellion. Instead of marking his re-election with the usual celebrations, he chose to visit the frontlines of the rebellion, where he was shot and seriously wounded, dying soon afterwards. In what was dismissed by critics as a 'dynastic coup', Déby was replaced by a military junta headed by his son Mahamat. Supposedly transitional, it remained in power as this book went to press.

While constitutional rules and political realities help define what a democratic executive can or cannot do, understanding executives in authoritarian regimes is more complicated: although they must also work with constitutions and rules, and must live with a greater variety of non-constitutional threats to their tenure, the typical **authoritarian executive** faces far fewer constraints on its ability to execute policy than its democratic counterpart (see Figure 8.2). At the same time, the powers of the office should not be overstated: the powers of authoritarian leaders are often less a reflection of the terms of the constitution than of the capacity of officeholders to manipulate the political system to their own advantage (so long, of course, as they can remain alive). The case of President Déby offers an example of a leader coming up against an extreme form of limitation on his term in office.

Authoritarian executive: A presidential executive or monarch whose powers face few constitutional or political limits.

Role	*Features*
Leadership	Political power focused in the office of the president or the monarch, the officeholder often being more important than the office.
Roles	Leader serves as head of government as well as head of state.
Making policy	Defining the policy priorities and interests of the ruling regime.
Terms in office	Length of terms are defined less by the constitution than by the capacity of leaders to hold on to power. Presidential monarchs face elections, but outcome is usually assured by vote rigging, threats, and the marginalization of opponents.
Powers	All other government institutions are subservient to the executive, who typically uses patronage, control of the opposition, and even violence to keep others malleable.

Figure 8.2 Executives in authoritarian regimes

As we saw in Chapter 5, there are two kinds of authoritarian executive: absolute monarchs and presidential executives that evolve into becoming presidential monarchs. In the case of the first of these, monarchs control government, tolerate little or any opposition, and ensure that the legislature and courts are weak. History is replete with examples, from King Louis XIV of France (reigned 1643–1715) to Peter the Great of Russia (reigned 1689–1725), and while the powers of today's absolute monarchs may not be quite so complete, they are still substantial. In addition to the traditional dynasties of the Arab world that were discussed in Chapter 5, current examples of absolute monarchs include King Mswati III of Eswatini in southern Africa, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei in Southeast Asia, and Sultan Haitham bin Tariq Al Said of Oman. In such cases, monarchs use a patriarchal style that emphasizes ruling over governing.

The second and most common form of authoritarian executive is a president who functions much like a monarch. Such leaders lack most of the constitutional or political limits of their democratic counterparts, including – in most cases – term limits, or the need to run in competitive elections. Even where term limits exist, a dominant political party might be able to make sure that opposition candidates are unable to win office, and leaders will sometimes change the rules so as to give themselves unlimited terms in office. They go through the motions of running for re-election, but manipulate the process – repressing their opponents and encouraging loyalty among their supporters (see Chapter 14) – in order to guarantee themselves an unending string of victories. This happened with President Déby, for example, who won elections in 1996 and 2001, and then arranged for the elimination of term limits, winning re-election – in manipulated contests – in 2006, 2011, 2016, and 2021. By such means, dictators create dictatorships (see Ezrow and Frantz, 2011).

Svolik (2012) points out that dictators lack the support of independent political authorities that would help them enforce agreements, as well as the rules that govern the work of formal government institutions. As a result, they might be inclined to use more extreme methods to win and wield power, but they also often face greater personal risks than their democratic counterparts. They can use the military to repress, for example, but once the military becomes essential to the survival of a regime, it acquires leverage that it can use against the regime, and might even turn against the regime if pushed far enough.

Presidential monarchies provide a natural platform for leaders who want to set themselves apart from – and above – all others. In such systems, presidents use what they define as their direct mandate from the people to cast a shadow over competing institutions such as the courts and the legislature. While they do not usually go so far as to reduce these bodies to completely token status (they particularly need the courts and the bureaucracy to keep things running), they work to concentrate power in themselves and their supporters rather than to distribute it among institutions. It is this lack of institutionalization that is the

central feature of the authoritarian executive, and what we find in its place is the tradition of personalism discussed in Chapter 5.

While succession in most absolute monarchies is assured by heredity, incumbents in several presidential monarchies have successfully groomed family members to succeed them. However, the lack of a formal succession procedure can create a conflict among potential successors not only after the leader's exit, but also in the run-up to it. Presidential monarchs keep their job for as long as they can ward off their rivals, which means that they must monitor threats and be prepared to neutralize those who are becoming too strong. Politics, as a result, comes before policy.

The price of defeat, furthermore, is high; politics in authoritarian regimes can literally be a matter of life and death. When the leaders of democracies leave office, they can give well-paid lectures, write and sell their memoirs for large sums, be appointed to well-paid consultancies, or set up foundations to do good works. Ousted dictators risk a harsher fate, assuming they even live long enough to have a 'retirement'. The lucky ones might live in wealthy exile, while others languish in prison, and yet others are executed on the street. It is hardly surprising, then, that the governing style of presidential monarchs inclines to the ruthless.

Few dictatorships in recent history have collapsed so quickly into violent chaos as the one in Libya. Ruled from 1969 by the autocratic and often eccentric Muammar Gaddafi, Libya became a classic example of despotism. Gaddafi came to power in a military coup and never put his leadership to the test of an election. When the country broke down in civil war in February 2011, Gaddafi moved location in order to evade capture, but in late October that year he was found hiding in drainage pipes on a construction site, where he was beaten to death. No arrangements had been made for his succession, and only in 2015 did a UN-brokered agreement result in the creation of a new government, but it failed to win general approval, and a second civil war broke out. The Libyan case shows that government in an authoritarian regime is often so closely tied to a single leader that the system falls apart after that person is gone.

At the same time, personalism is sometimes far from absolute, because many dictators find themselves constrained by other political actors, including the military, leaders of ethnic groups, landowners, the business class, the bureaucracy, multinational companies, and even factions in the leader's own court. To survive, leaders must distribute the perks of office so as to maintain a viable coalition of support, which is why personal rule is closely tied to corruption, and the gallery of the world's most corrupt leaders includes many who have held presidential office in authoritarian regimes; examples include the following:

- Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines (1972–86).
- Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire (now Democratic Republic of the Congo) (1965–97).
- Suharto of Indonesia (1967–98).

- Zine Al-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia (1987–2011).
- Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo of Equatorial Guinea (since 1979).
- Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan (since 1994).
- Bashar al-Assad of Syria (since 2000).
- Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua (since 2007).

Systems of personal rule have survived for centuries in the Middle East, limiting the development of strong institutions. While the Arab Spring revealed the weaknesses of dictatorships, as frustrated populations in several states protested against corrupt and conservative regimes headed by staid autocrats, the challenges of switching from autocracy to democracy were substantial. The problem was reflected in the case of Egypt, where President Hosni Mubarak was ousted from office in 2011 in the wake of demonstrations against his 30-year regime. In 2012 the country's first ever truly competitive elections resulted in the victory of Mohamed Morsi, and there was reason to be optimistic for the country's future.

However, because Morsi came from the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, nervousness grew abroad, particularly in the United States. When Morsi started showing signs of authoritarianism, he was removed in a July 2013 military coup led by military chief General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi. The general then reinvented himself as a civilian, turning in his military uniform for a two-piece suit, won elections held in May 2014, and quickly showed an unwillingness to tolerate opposition. After a brief and hopeful flirtation with democracy, Egyptian government was soon back to its old ways. This was not what most Egyptians wanted, and opposition to the El-Sisi regime grew, but Egypt's other political institutions were too weak to resist a return to personal rule, and El-Sisi was returned to office for a second four-year term after March 2018 elections that were widely condemned as fraudulent. Although El-Sisi said that it would be his final term, the constitution was changed in 2019 to extend presidential terms to six years and to give El-Sisi a third term.

One variation on the theme of authoritarian executives is found in the five remaining communist regimes: China, Cuba, Laos, North Korea, and Vietnam. These are distinctive for the way in which executive, legislative, and judicial powers are intertwined with a one-party system, such that leadership goes beyond simply holding executive powers. China has – at least until recently – combined some of the formal features of a semi-presidential system with political dominance by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), but all is not as it might appear:

- In spite of China's intricate governmental structure (which includes a cabinet, a legislature, and a network of supporting agencies), these bodies do little more than legitimize the decisions already taken by the party leadership (Saich, 2015).
- Identifying who holds power is less a question of formal titles and offices than of understanding links across institutions, personal networks, and the standing of key figures in the system. For example, Deng Xiaoping was

'paramount leader' of China from 1978 until his death in 1997, yet the most senior posts he ever held were those of party vice chairman and chairman of the party's Military Commission. By 1993, the only position of any kind that he held was the presidency of China's bridge association. Jiang Zemin may have been general secretary of the CCP from 1989 to 2002, and president of China from 1993 to 2003, but Deng was still the real power in China.

As China emerged out of isolation in the 1990s, it seemed to be headed towards adopting an executive that looked like some of its democratic counterparts. At the apex was the president, who was nominated by the leadership of the Chinese legislature (the National People's Congress (NPC)) and then elected (or confirmed) by the NPC for a maximum of two five-year terms. The presidency was, at first, mainly a ceremonial head of state, but it had many executive powers, such as the ability to appoint (with NPC approval) all members of the State Council (the functional equivalent of a cabinet), and the officeholder was also conventionally head of the CCP. At the same time, the president had to work with a premier, the *de facto* head of government, and a senior member of the party nominated by the president and confirmed by the NPC. Matters changed after 2013, when Xi Jinping became president and exerted more control over China, cracking down on dissent and corruption, supporting internet censorship, and advocating a more assertive foreign policy for China. In March 2018 he solidified his control by arranging for the CCP to abandon a clause in the constitution limiting the president to two five-year terms.

For their part, military leaders are perhaps the ultimate form of the authoritarian executive, combining as they do control over civilian and military institutions. They are currently less common than they once were, but even if full-fledged military leaders are unusual, there are still many civilian leaders who rely for office on keeping the military happy. If great power in democracies comes with great responsibilities, then power in dictatorships comes with great risks, as illustrated by the case of Nigeria. Since independence in 1960, it has had 15 leaders: six civilian presidents (two of whom were former military leaders who came back to office as civilians) and nine military leaders. Of the 15, three were removed from office through military coups in which the leaders were killed, and four were removed from office but survived. Even though Nigeria has been under civilian government since 1999, all its leaders must keep a careful eye on critics within the military, who have always been ready to organize opposition and, if necessary, a coup to remove the incumbent.

Although they do not always capture international headlines (because most countries and their media are only interested in their major allies and their major enemies), authoritarian executives are more common than their democratic counterparts. As we saw in Chapters 4 and 5, the Democracy

Index in 2022 ranked 95 countries as hybrid or authoritarian regimes (compared to 72 full or flawed democracies), while Freedom in the World ranked 57 countries as Not Free and another 54 as Partly Free. For these reasons, it is important that we pay more attention to the nature of authoritarian executives, to the forces that keep them in place, and to the conditions needed to limit their powers and to ensure a more even sharing of those powers with other political institutions.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of dividing the roles of head of state and head of government?
- To what extent, realistically, are democratic presidents able to rise above politics and to represent the national interest?
- Which option is most efficient and/or most democratic in a parliamentary system: prime ministerial government or cabinet government?
- Have prime ministers become too presidential and, if so, why?
- Do semi-presidential systems offer a useful compromise, offsetting the advantages and disadvantages of presidential and parliamentary executives?
- How far do the potentially greater risks and uncertainties experienced by authoritarian leaders explain the sometimes extreme methods they use to govern?

KEY CONCEPTS

- Authoritarian executive
- Cabinet
- Coalition government
- Cohabitation
- Constitutional monarchy
- Executive
- Head of government
- Head of state
- Leadership
- Parliamentary executive
- Presidential executive
- Republic
- Semi-presidential executive
- Separation of powers

FURTHER READING

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SPOTLIGHT 8
BRAZIL

PROFILE

As the world's fifth biggest country by land and population, Brazil is also one of the world's largest democracies. It is the most important state in South America and has expanded its influence to reach the Global South more broadly, taking its place among the BRICS countries with Russia, India, China, and South Africa. However, Brazil still faces many domestic problems. There is a wide gap between rich and poor, much of the arable land in Brazil is owned by a few wealthy families, social conditions in its major cities are poor, the deforestation of the Amazon basin has global ecological implications, and corruption is rife at all levels of government, where influence is divided among numerous political parties. Recent economic developments have sent mixed signals, with oil discoveries pointing to energy self-sufficiency, but an economic downturn and a return to politics as usual casting clouds over Brazil's continued progress.

Form of government	Federal presidential republic consisting of 26 states and a federal capital district. Independence achieved 1822, and most recent constitution adopted 1988.
Executive	Presidential. A president directly elected for no more than two consecutive four-year terms.
Legislature	Bicameral National Congress: lower Chamber of Deputies (513 members) elected for renewable four-year terms, and upper Senate (81 members) elected from the states (three members each) for renewable eight-year terms.
Judiciary	A dual system of state and federal courts, with justices of superior courts nominated for life by the president and confirmed by the Senate. Supreme Federal Court serves as constitutional court: 11 members, nominated by president and confirmed by Senate for life, but must retire at 70.
Electoral system	A two-round majority system is used for elections to the presidency and the Senate, while elections to the Chamber of Deputies use proportional representation.
Parties	Multi-party, with numerous parties organized within Congress into several coalitions and a cluster of non-attached parties.
Population	215 million
Gross Domestic Product	$1,920 billion
Per capita GDP	$8,917
Democracy Index rating	Flawed democracy
Freedom House rating	Partly Free
Corruption score	36/100
Human Development Index rating	High

CASE STUDY: THE POLITICAL EXECUTIVE IN BRAZIL

Bloomberg / Contributor

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva (known popularly as Lula) appears at a May Day labour rally in Sao Paulo to announce an increase in Brazil's monthly minimum wage.

Brazil has a presidential executive, but gives its leader more constitutional powers than its American equivalent: the president of Brazil can issue decrees in specified areas, declare bills to be urgent (forcing the National Congress to make a prompt decision), initiate bills in the Congress, and can propose a budget which goes into effect, month by month, if Congress does not itself pass a budget. At the same time, Brazilian presidents must work with three critical handicaps that can make it difficult to bend Congress to their will.

First, thanks to the use of proportional representation in Congressional elections, presidents are faced by a much more complex party landscape. The October 2022 legislative elections resulted in 23 parties winning seats in the Chamber of Deputies, with none winning more than 99 (out of the total of 513), 11 each winning ten seats or less. The Worker's Party of returning President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva won just 13 per cent of the seats in the new Congress.

Second, party discipline is exceptionally weak. Deputies often switch party in mid-term and are more concerned with winning resources for their districts than with showing loyalty to their party. In response, Brazil's presidents must build informal coalitions by appointing ministers from a range of parties in an attempt to encourage their loyalty; nearly a dozen parties were represented in the cabinet following the 2022 elections.

Third, impeachment in Brazil is more than the hollow partisan threat that it has recently proved to be in the United States. One of the few successful recent examples of the procedure occurred in Brazil in 2016, when the National Congress voted to remove President Dilma Rousseff from office on charges that she had moved funds between different government budget lines in an effort to close deficits in popular social programmes. She was replaced by her vice-president, Michel Temer, who saw out the remainder of Rousseff's term. Although Latin American constitutions appear to give the chief executive a more important political role, appearances can be deceptive: presidents operating in a democratic setting confront inherent difficulties in securing their programme.

Further reading

Bianchi, Bernardo, Jorge Chaloub, Patricia Rangel, and Frieder Otto Wolf (eds) (2021) *Democracy and Brazil: Collapse and Regression* (Routledge).

Lapper, Richard (2021) *Beef, Bible and Bullets: Brazil in the Age of Bolsonaro* (Manchester University Press).

Roett, Riordan (2016) *Brazil: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press).

9

Legislatures

CONTENTS

- Understanding legislatures
- Origins and evolution
- The roles of legislatures
- Representatives and their work
- Legislatures in authoritarian regimes

PREVIEW

Legislatures are the institutions of government that are closest to the citizens, since they are typically directly elected and responsible for representing individual districts, rather than – as is the case with executives – an entire country. They also carry out multiple tasks that are essential to government, including the representation of voter interests, the review of legislation, and control over the executive through oversight, the review of public spending, and support for – or opposition to – its policies. It is all the more ironic, then, that legislatures and their members are not always popular with voters, and that many political scientists describe them as having been in an almost constant state of declining power, which suggests – not entirely accurately – that they were once relatively powerful.

This chapter begins with a review of the different forms taken by legislatures, and the different roles that they play. The chapter goes on to look at how legislatures emerged and evolved before discussing the differences between those with one chamber and those with two chambers. It then considers the membership of legislatures and the nature of representation, looking particularly at the problem of declining public trust in legislatures, made worse by the phenomenon of the career politician, and encouraging more voters to think about the pros and cons of imposing term limits on legislators. Finally, it looks at the role of legislatures in authoritarian regimes, pointing out that while they may appear weak, they have a number of uses for leaders and ruling elites.

KEY ARGUMENTS

- Legislatures are usually thought of as the focus of popular representation and law-making, but these are not their only functions.
- The extent to which legislatures are involved in making law depends on their relationship with executives and the balance of political parties.
- For most countries, a single-chamber legislature is enough. For others, a second chamber offers important benefits to the quality of representation.
- Not all representatives are equal, and several models have been developed – including the delegate, the trustee, the partisan, and the mediator – to explain their work.
- Legislatures are often accused of being homes to career politicians, who collectively constitute a political class with a background and interests too far removed from the people it represents.
- Legislatures are found in most authoritarian regimes, where the incorporation of moderate opponents lies at the heart of understanding their political role.

UNDERSTANDING LEGISLATURES

Italy has had a long history of unstable government, brought on in part by an effort after World War II to avoid the kind of centralization of power that led to the dictatorship of Benito Mussolini (in office 1922–43). With numerous parties winning seats in the Italian parliament, it has since been hard to build stable coalitions, as a result of which governments regularly fall: there were more than 60 governments between 1946 and 2023, lasting an average of less than a year.

In an effort to address this problem and to streamline the work of parliament, a national referendum was held in September 2020 in which Italians – by an overwhelming majority – supported the idea of cutting the number of members of parliament by more than a third (from 630 to 400). The result of the vote – concluded *The Economist (2020)* – was an expression of 'the distrust of a governing elite whose members are seen by many Italians as pampered, corruptible and virtually impossible to dislodge'. Critics charged that the change would weaken the authority of parliament, but it was seen by many as a necessary step in addressing Italy's recurring political problems. The first test of the new arrangement, in the general election of September 2022, was less than encouraging: voter turnout fell by more than 9 per cent, the number of parties that won seats was almost unchanged, and the share of seats won by the biggest party fell from 33 per cent to 26 per cent.

Most people think of a **legislature** as lying at the heart of representation in government, but all is not as it sometimes seems: legislatures are not governing bodies, the extent to which they represent ordinary citizens is questionable, and their role in making laws is often only partial. Instead, their political significance lies in the link they provide between citizens and government, and in the controls they exert over the executive. Their work, though, is often reactive rather than proactive, their difficulties compounded by the divisions among their members, which are influenced in turn – in democracies at least – by the role of political parties. The British political philosopher John Stuart Mill (1861) once argued that legislatures were 'radically unfit' for the job of governing, and that their proper job was to 'watch and control' the government, and to act as a society's 'Committee of Grievances and … Congress of Opinions'. How far this analysis has since evolved remains a matter of debate.

Legislature: A multi-member representative body which considers public issues, shapes laws, represents voters, and augments or controls the work of executives.

Today's democratic legislatures contribute to the process of governance as well as to expressions of the popular will: they can improve the quality of legislation, they can hold the executive accountable, and they can hold influential hearings on matters of public concern. Legislatures are typically large institutions whose members share the same working space as peers with often quite different perspectives and values. At stake might be the content of new laws, items on a national budget, or new public policies, and achieving compromise can be hard. Legislators also cannot forget that they work within a complex dynamic of power that they share with the executive and the courts.

In authoritarian regimes, meanwhile, opinions are mixed about the place of legislatures. They can be useful in helping incorporate moderate opponents,

integrating centre and periphery, recruiting for the elite, and in making concessions to demands for change. At the same time, recent research has suggested that there are many nuances to the role of legislatures in authoritarian systems; the extent to which they can be used to exert control depends on a complex three-way relationship between the executive, the legislature, and political parties, and the extent to which legislatures can be used to co-opt opponents of the ruling regime.

Although most countries in the world have a legislature, they vary in terms of their structure, powers, autonomy, and place within their political systems. The US Congress, for example, is still arguably the world's most powerful legislature, because it controls the legislative process and has several channels through which it can limit the powers of the president of the United States. At the other end of the scale, the Majlis Ash-Shura (or Consultative Council) of Saudi Arabia is probably the world's weakest legislature: it works with a ruling monarch, it was founded only in 1993, all its members are appointed by the king, and it can only propose new laws, without the power to approve or enforce them.

Despite the importance of legislatures, and their closeness to voters, they are not always popular. When we see the kind of data that we saw in Chapter 6 about declining trust in government, it is often legislatures – thanks to their partisan nature and lack of equal representation – that most clearly account for the numbers. Figure 9.1 shows comparative polling data on trust in some of the national legislatures of the member states of the European Union. Since the early 2000s, surveys have found levels of trust in these legislatures averaging about 25–40 per cent, but with some notable differences from one country to another:

- The Scandinavian legislatures mainly have the highest levels of public approval, but this is still only in the range of 60–65 per cent. One study of the Danish parliament (the Folketing) (Pedersen, 2020) reveals that it is

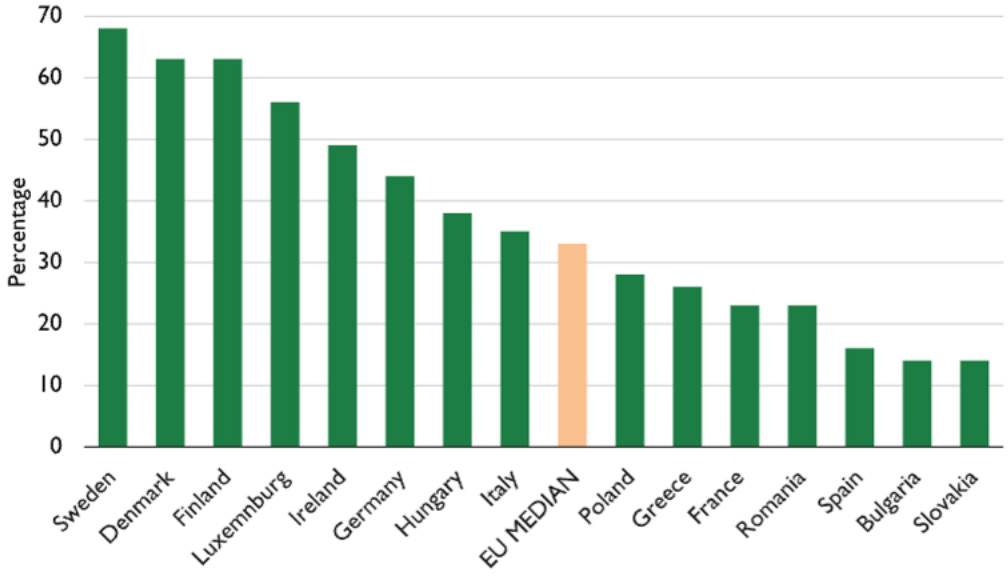

Figure 9.1 Comparing levels of trust in European legislatures

Source: Based on European Commission (2023). Numbers reflect the percentage of people tending to trust the national legislature.

much more highly regarded by Danish voters than either political parties or the government, thanks to a combination of its accessibility and professionalism.

- The Italian parliament does poorly in part because of the problems outlined earlier, including a reputation for corruption and partisanship.
- Trust in the French National Assembly is low mainly because of a long tradition of public distrust in political institutions, compounded by the marginal place of the legislature relative to the presidency.
- Most Eastern European legislatures rank low in part because of a general concern with democratic backsliding in several Central and Eastern European states (Stanley, 2019).

Matters are not much better in the United States, where Gallup polls held since the 1970s have rarely found Congressional job approval ranging above 40 per cent. There was a brief and heady moment following the 9/11 attacks in 2001 when a sense of national unity in the face of adversity pushed approval to a record 84 per cent, but it has since fallen dramatically, reaching an all-time low of 9 per cent in 2013 and otherwise hovering since 2010 at about 10–20 per cent (Gallup, 2023). The effects have been reflected in a growing anti-incumbency movement among American voters, and have also fed into a discussion among Americans about the merits of encouraging greater turnover by imposing term limits.

Ken Cedeno / Contributor

Members of the United States Congress gather for the annual State of the Union address by the president. The US Congress is one of the world's more powerful legislatures, but it is also unpopular among Americans, many of whom criticize it for its partisanship.

ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

Legislatures have a long history, although in their modern form they are a relatively recent development, and have undergone many changes as the roles of executives and political parties have evolved. The earliest assemblies in the Western tradition were the Ecclesia of Athens, open to all male citizens with two years of military service. Later, in the royal courts of Europe, monarchs would meet with nobles to decide important legal cases. Gradually these assemblies became more settled and structured, coming to represent the various 'estates' – the clergy, the nobility, and the towns – into which society was then divided. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, monarchs began to consult estate leaders more consistently on issues of war, administration, commerce, and taxation. As this happened, assemblies became a more settled part of government.

The world's oldest surviving legislature is the Althing of Iceland, which dates back to 930. The world's first parliamentary body was created in what is now Spain in 1188 by King Alfonso IX of Leon, the second followed in Portugal in 1254, and the third followed in England in 1265. The latter, though, met only twice, and it was not until the fourteenth century that the foundations of today's British Parliament were laid. Other European assemblies were slower to evolve, often being informal gatherings rather than formal institutions.

As new states emerged in the different waves described in Chapter 3, so the number of new political systems grew, and with them the number of legislatures. Even as this was happening, though, studies were being published that lamented the decline of legislatures in the face of the growing power and influence of executives and political parties (see Bryce, 1921, and Wheare, 1963). Mezey (2020) argues that this conclusion was based less on real and absolute decline than on a combination of an idealized past 'golden age' of legislatures that never really existed, and on comparisons with the relative strength of the US Congress. He also points out, though, that many of the hopes for Huntington's third wave of democracy (1974–91) did not come to fruition, that legislatures did not always develop strong roots in Latin America, Asia, or Africa, and that legislatures everywhere remain vulnerable to the advantages that executives enjoy; legislatures are large and often politically divided institutions that rarely produce important or popular political personalities. This leaves executives (even presidents or prime ministers with low approval ratings) to dominate the idea of leadership.

As legislatures have evolved, so their structural features have developed more consistency, and more has been understood about their internal dynamics. Few of these features are more important than the number of chambers they contain, and how those chambers are elected. Most countries – just under 60 per cent of the total (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024) – are small or homogeneous enough to make do with a **unicameral** (single-chambered) legislature. For reasons of history, politics, or practical need, however, the rest have **bicameral** (double-chambered) legislatures. These are most often found in larger countries and in democracies, and they are universal in federations, where the second chamber typically represents the component states or provinces.

Unicameral and bicameral: Terms referring to the number of chambers in a legislature.

In the case of bicameral legislatures, one is usually known as the first (or lower) chamber and the other as the second (or upper) chamber. The origins of this

ranking are unclear, but they probably trace back to the way in which the British Parliament was once divided between aristocrats and commoners, with the 'Lords Spiritual and Temporal' making up the more exclusive 'upper' chamber. Perhaps counterintuitively, lower chambers (see Figure 9.2 for examples) are usually more powerful, generating a phenomenon known as **weak bicameralism**. They often have the sole or dominating control over budgetary matters, are almost always the starting point for bills, can sometimes override vetoes or amendments offered by the second chamber, and are usually bigger, averaging 254 members compared with 95 in the upper chamber (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024).

Weak bicameralism: This arises when the lower chamber dominates the upper, providing the primary focus for government accountability.

In this system, which is typical of parliamentary governments in unitary systems (see Chapter 11), the government's survival depends on maintaining the chamber's support. In presidential governments, meanwhile, where presidents are directly elected and their continuation in office does not depend on keeping the support of the legislature, there is less need for the executive's accountability to focus on a single chamber. A more evenly balanced system of **strong bicameralism** can emerge in these conditions, especially when combined with federalism. Australia and the United States are among the best illustrations of this kind of arrangement. With their constitutional positions as representative of the states, the Senates of each country play a full part in national governance and have most of the same powers as their respective House of Representatives.

Strong bicameralism: This occurs when the two chambers are more balanced, as in federations with presidential executives.

The choice between one and two chambers reflects contrasting visions of democracy. Unicameral legislatures are justified by the majoritarian idea of popular control, the logic being that a legislature based on direct popular election reflects the popular will and should not be obstructed. Also, a single chamber is more accountable, economical, and decisive. Conversely, bicameral legislatures are justified on the grounds that the upper chamber offers checks and balances, provides more considered debate because its members usually have longer terms in office, can be more collegial because it is usually smaller, and can defend individual and group interests against a potentially oppressive majority in the lower chamber. The second chamber can also serve as a house of review: a second chamber for second thoughts.

Name	*Examples*
Chamber of Deputies	Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Czech Republic, Haiti, Italy, Mexico, Romania, Rwanda.
National Assembly	Angola, Bulgaria, Cuba, France, Greece, Hungary, Kuwait, Pakistan, South Africa, South Korea, Turkey, Venezuela, Vietnam.
House of Representatives	Australia, Egypt, Indonesia, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Philippines, Thailand, United States.
House of Commons	Canada, United Kingdom.
House of the People	Afghanistan, India.
Majlis (Consultative Council)	Iran, Maldives, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia.

Figure 9.2 Examples of lower chambers

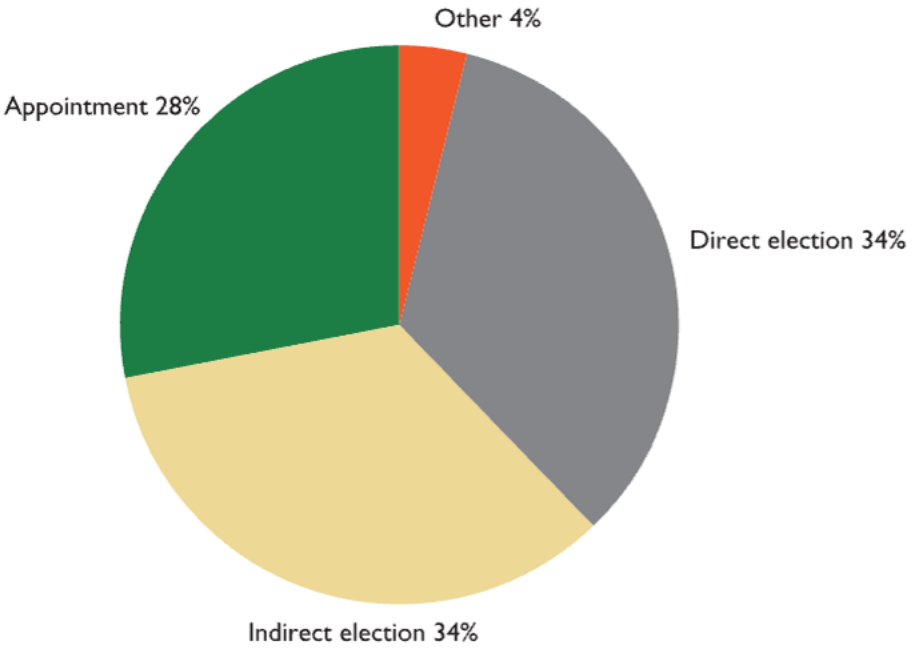

Figure 9.3 Selecting the upper chamber

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (2024). Based on total number of seats, not number of upper chambers. For comparison, nearly 95 per cent of members of the first (lower) chamber are directly elected.

A key question arising with bicameral legislatures concerns how to select the upper chamber. There is not much point in having a bicameral legislature unless the two chambers represent public interests differently; if they are the same size, are elected in the same way, and have the same powers, they will simply replicate one another (as they do in Italy). One means of avoiding this duplication is to choose the two chambers in different ways, to which end there are three main options: direct election, indirect election, or appointment (see Figure 9.3).

Unsurprisingly, direct election is the most common and popular option. An example of the rarer use of indirect election can be found in France, where members of the Senate are elected by members of electoral colleges in each of France's *départements* (counties). These colleges are made up of regional councillors, mayors, city councillors, and members of the National Assembly from the area, with a weighting towards rural areas that has helped keep the Senate politically conservative.

An example of appointment can be found in Canada, where all 105 members of the Senate are appointed by the governor-general, the representative of the British monarch, who is still Canada's head of state. Since reforms in 2015, though, the appointments have been made on the recommendation of an Independent Advisory Board, which proposes nominees from pools of candidates who have expressed interest in serving as Senators. Instead of the old arrangement in which senators were members of either of the two major Canadian political parties (the Liberals and the Conservatives), and the Senate was often partisan, most senators are now members of the Independent Senators Group. The result, argues Thomas (2019), has been a new Senate that 'operates on the basis of a dispersed, horizontal, and shared form of leadership that depends on "soft power" techniques such as consultation, persuasion, and negotiation'.

Even when upper chambers are directly elected, a contrast with the lower house is still normally achieved by giving members of the upper house longer terms: typically five or six years compared with four or five in the lower chamber (see Table 9.1). To sharpen the contrast further, the election cycle is often staggered; hence senators in the United States serve six-year terms, with one-third of the seats up for election every two years, while senators in France serve three-year terms with half the seats up for election every three years.

A federal structure (see Chapter 11) can have the effect of skewing representation in the upper chamber of a legislature, with bigger states being under-represented and smaller states being over-represented. For example, the US Senate contains two members for each of 50 states, meaning that the 40 million residents of California have the same number of representatives in the Senate as the 580,000 residents of Wyoming. The same kind of imbalance is found in the Brazilian Senate, which has three members for each state, meaning that Sao Paulo in the south (population 44 million) has the same representation as Amapá in the north (population 750,000).

As for the lower chambers, the numbers of representatives are usually distributed in a way that allows for more balanced representation; electoral districts for the US House of Representatives and the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies (the lower chambers) are designed to be equal in population. The US fares better

Table 9.1: Comparing upper chambers

Country	Name	Members	Term (years)	Method of selection
Australia	Senate	76	6	Direct election by voters in each state.
Germany	Bundesrat	69	Variable	Appointed by state governments.
Ireland	Senate	60	5	11 appointed by the Prime Minister, 43 elected from vocational panels, and 6 from two universities.
India	Rajya Sabha	245	6	233 indirectly elected through state assemblies, and 12 appointed by the president.
Mexico	Senate	128	6	Direct election. Biggest party in each state wins 2 seats from the state, second-placed party wins 1 seat, and 32 Senators elected at-large for the country.
Russia	Federation Council	166	6	Elected by local legislatures and executives with 'approval' of president.
USA	Senate	100	6	Direct election by voters in each state.

Source: Based on data in Inter-Parliamentary Union (2024).

than Brazil, though, where the number of citizens per deputy runs from a low of 53,000 to a high of 570,000, greatly distorting the equality of representation.

THE ROLES OF LEGISLATURES

How we understand the differences among the world's legislatures depends to a large extent on how we understand the multiple roles they play, of which (in democracies) three stand out: legislation, representation, and control (summarized in Figure 9.4).

Legislation

Above all, the work of legislatures is concerned with making and shaping law, a job reflected in the origins of the terms *legislator* and *legislature* in the Latin roots *lex* ('law') and *lator* ('proposer' or 'carrier'). This role should not be taken too literally, though, because while the shaping of new laws and the amendment of existing laws is mainly in the hands of legislatures, the ideas for those laws and amendments may originate elsewhere.

In parliamentary systems whose legislatures are relatively weak, such as Australia, Britain, and New Zealand, proposals for new laws (known as bills) come mainly from the executive, and bills will often pass without too much trouble through the legislature, whose role is often reactive in the sense that it can debate and make a few changes, but ultimately follows the orders of the executive. By contrast, in parliamentary systems with relatively strong legislatures, such as Italy and Japan, or with a history of coalition governments, such as Belgium, Norway, and Sweden, the focus of decision-making lies more within the legislature. This is because coalition governments are based on compromises among political parties, their influence in turn being shaped by the number of legislative seats they hold.

In presidential systems with relatively strong congresses, meanwhile, legislatures have more autonomy in law-making. In the United States, for example, only members of Congress can formally introduce bills, although presidents can work around this by finding a friendly representative to initiate a bill on their behalf, and presidents also have the authority to veto legislation with which they disagree. The separation of powers inherent in a presidential system limits executive influence over the legislature, a phenomenon that is often reinforced by divided government: when a president comes from a different party than the one that dominates one or both chambers of the legislature.

Role	*Features*
Legislation	Reviewing, amending, and approving new laws.
Representation	Representing and promoting the interests of voters, usually under a party label.
Control	Exerting control over the executive, through support for – or opposition to – its policies or providing oversight.

Figure 9.4 Legislatures in democratic regimes

Representation

The second role of legislatures is to represent the interests and concerns of voters to government. While executives are further removed from citizens and more concerned with broad national and international issues and problems, the members of legislatures usually represent smaller districts and have more time and opportunity to focus on local needs. Just how well they do this, though, depends on what they hear from their constituents, on the responsiveness of representatives, and on the degree of partisan division.

There are different opinions about the institutional dynamics of legislative representation. One approach is to focus on **descriptive representation**, looking at the extent to which a legislature looks like the society it represents. It is reflected in its most basic form by the argument made by John Adams (second president of the United States) that a legislature 'should be an exact portrait, in miniature, of the people at large, as it should think, feel, reason and act like them' (Adams, 1856). In practice, though, legislatures are rarely a demographic reflection of the people they represent; see *Exploring Problems 9* and discussion later in this chapter on gendered institutions.

Descriptive representation: A type of representation in which legislators look like the larger group of people that they represent, in terms of gender, class, or ethnicity, for example.

Another approach is the idea of c**ollective representation**, looking at the extent to which legislators work in the interests of all voters, not just those in their home districts. Consider the point made in 1774 by the politician Edmund Burke just after his election to the British Parliament: he admitted that he knew nothing about his constituency, but then argued that Parliament was not 'a congress of ambassadors from different and hostile interests' so much as 'a deliberative assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole' (Burke, 1774). An interesting idea, to be sure, but one that is prevented from being put into practice by the reliance that legislators have on the votes of citizens in their home districts.

Collective representation: The idea that legislators should represent the interests of all voters, not just those in the district that elected them.

Control

The third role played by legislatures is that of controlling governments, which takes two key forms. The first of these lies in augmenting the work of the executive, which can mean supporting, complementing, or offsetting; the best term to use depends on the nature of the political system and the balance of political forces. In presidential systems such as Brazil, Mexico, or the United States, the president – being separately elected – does not rely on sympathetic party members in the legislature to stay in office. Even so, those members play a critical role in determining the ability of the executive to lead; a supportive legislature provides a clearer path to effective leadership, while one dominated by opposition parties will provide obstacles and roadblocks.

In parliamentary systems, by contrast, the government is almost entirely dependent on the party make-up of the legislature; see *Spotlight 9* on the UK at the end of this chapter. As a result, Laver (2006) considers the most important role of a legislature in a parliamentary system to be 'making and breaking governments'. An executive can neither take office, nor continue in power, without a supporting majority (or, at least, a workable minority) in the legislature. Furthermore, the strength of the ruling party or coalition in the legislature influences the government's stability. As we saw in Chapter 8, a government based

EXPLORING PROBLEMS 9

HOW CAN WE ENSURE THAT LEGISLATURES ARE REPRESENTATIVE?

Legislatures may claim to be representative bodies, and yet they rarely look like the societies they represent: their members are typically wealthier, better educated, and more likely to be members of economic and cultural elites than the general population. Part of the problem lies in the advantage of incumbency: once elected, representatives build contacts, familiarity and experience that makes it less likely that they will be removed from office, and less likely that the social make-up of legislatures will change. The result might be what Jackson (1994) once described as the 'three As': arrogance, apathy, and atrophy.

Turnover is highest in states using party list proportional representation (see Chapter 14), which allows party leaders to ensure at least a trickle of new blood into the system. In states using plurality elections, meanwhile, turnover is usually lower, the extreme case being the United States, where incumbents – thanks to their visibility, their access to campaign funds and party support, and the effects of gerrymandering (see Chapter 14) – have a greater than 90 per cent chance of being re-elected (Bardes et al., 2022).

Term limits: Rules that restrict elected politicians to a maximum number of periods in office, or that ban re-election without a break.

One potential answer to the problem of the unrepresentative character of legislatures is to impose **term limits** in the hope that they will produce more turnover and a greater variety in the membership of legislatures. While limits apply to executives in democracies, though, who rarely stay in office for more than about eight–ten years, they are rarely used in national legislatures. One of the few exceptions is Mexico, which does not allow members of its Chamber of Deputies to serve more than four three-year terms, or members of its Senate to serve more than two six-year terms.

As we think about how to make legislatures representative, we need to think about exactly what being representative mean. When it comes to the specific idea of term limits, consider the following questions:

- Can we only expect legislatures to be representative if they reflect the social and political balance of society?
- Would term limits help bring more diversity into legislatures and ensure that they kept up with the changing needs and make-up of society?
- Would term limits prevent the best legislators from staying in office, and make it more difficult for representatives to develop long-term relationships with their districts and constituents?

on a single party with a legislative majority is likely to be more stable than a minority government.

Oversight: The checks and controls that one institution has over another, designed to encourage accountability and efficiency.

The second form of control is **oversight**, through which legislatures hold executives accountable for doing their jobs, addressing problems, managing crises, and managing budgets. The significance of this role in presidential systems depends on the balance of party numbers, on whether or not the legislature is dominated by the same party as holds the executive, and on whether or not the

executive has a positive and constructive relationship with the legislature. In parliamentary systems, by contrast, legislatures are usually more actively driven by the executive, but they have several ways of monitoring the executive:

- *Questions* can be posed to leaders and ministers, whether oral or written. In Britain, for example, members of the House of Commons ask numerous questions of bureaucrats and ministers, while one of the more colourful events in Parliament is the weekly Prime Minister's Question Time, a theatrical joust between the prime minister and the leader of the opposition.
- *Interpellations* are an alternative form of interrogation in some European legislatures, including Finland, France, and Germany. A form of confidence motion, an interpellation is a substantial question demanding a prompt response which is followed by a short debate and usually a vote on whether or not the government's answer is considered acceptable.
- *Emergency debates* (or urgent debates) are a higher-profile means of calling executives to account. In New Zealand, for example, they focus on matters of public importance that do not involve new laws, but that need the immediate attention of the government, such as alert level changes that were made on Covid-19 in 2021.

The most important means by which parliamentary legislatures can hold executives accountable is through a **vote of confidence**. Confidence votes are decisions on whether or not a government can continue in office, and can lead to a change of leadership and even new elections. One example was the 2011 vote of confidence in Canada, where the minority Conservative government of Stephen Harper was charged with failing to disclose the financial details of proposed new laws on crime and on corporate tax cuts. The loss of the vote triggered a new election, which ended up playing into the hands of the Conservatives by giving it more seats and allowing Harper to form a majority government. Harper left office in 2015 after the Conservatives were defeated by Justin Trudeau and his Liberal Party; five years later, his minority government survived a vote of confidence over the question of its spending on Covid-19 relief spending.

Vote of confidence: A vote in a legislature on the question of its confidence in the government to lead. If lost, it normally requires the resignation of the government.

In France and Sweden, a majority of all members (not only those voting) is required to confirm a legislature's loss of confidence. In other countries, a confidence motion is not specifically designated but is simply any vote on which the government would feel obliged to resign if defeated. Defeat on a motion to approve the budget would be a typical example. In some countries, again including Sweden, votes of confidence can be directed against individual ministers as well as the government as a whole.

Another vehicle of account is a **censure motion**, which is an expression of disapproval or criticism that is directed at a member of a legislature, aimed at rebuking their actions or conduct, and is usually non-binding (in contrast to the potential fall of a government tied to a motion of confidence). In some cases, the censure is focused on what is seen as a dereliction of duty or an overstepping of powers, as when the former Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison (in office 2018–22) was censured by the Australian House of Representatives in November 2022 for secretly having himself appointed to five ministerial positions. In

Censure motion: A vote in a legislature designed to indicate disapproval of a specific member of the government for a stated reason.

other cases, there is a more political tinge to a censure, as in February 2022 when the Republican National Committee in the United States censured two Republican members of the House of Representatives (Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger) for participating in the house committee investigating the 6 January attack on the US Capitol building.

Votes of confidence are not used in presidential systems, which have other means by which they can remove or restrict the executive. The most routine of these occurs when the legislature is controlled by a party or parties other than that of the president, limiting the ability of a president to pursue his or her agenda. In more extreme cases, some constitutions allow for the **recall** of presidents, resulting – if successful – in their being removed from office before their term is up. Where an election is a vote of confidence, a recall is a vote of no confidence, designed (theoretically, at least) to improve governance by removing incompetent or corrupt incumbents before their normal term is up. A vote is initiated by a petition signed by a minimum proportion (typically around 25 per cent) of the votes cast for that office at the previous election. This is possible in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela, has recently been considered in Brazil and Mexico, and is allowed for many state and local offices in the United States. It was used most famously in 2003 when the governor of California was recalled and succeeded by the actor Arnold Schwarzenegger, and used again with a failed attempt to recall Governor Gavin Newsom in 2021.

Recall: A popular vote on whether an elected official should be removed from office during normal tenure.

While recalls are public votes, another option for removing a president, that is contained within a legislature, is **impeachment**. In parliamentary systems where this is possible – such as Austria, Germany, India, Ireland, and Italy – it applies to presidents who are heads of state, and impeachment has never been used. The process is more politically significant in states with executive presidents, such as Brazil, France, Iran, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Korea, Turkey, Russia, and the United States. In the United States – where Bill Clinton was impeached in 1998–99 and Donald Trump was twice impeached, in 2020 and 2021 – it describes only the actual bringing of charges by the House of Representatives. It is up to the Senate to decide whether to acquit or to convict. In other countries, impeachment describes the successful removal of a president from office.

Impeachment: The removal from office of a sitting president (or other officials, such as government ministers or judges) through a vote in the legislature.

REPRESENTATIVES AND THEIR WORK

While it is important to understand legislatures as institutions, it is also important to understand their members and how they go about their work, thereby moving from institutional to behavioural ideas about government. Members are expected to represent, but opinion is divided on just how that happens. At least four **models of representation** have emerged (summarized in Figure 9.5), but the possibilities are almost endless; one study of the British House of Commons (Searing, 1994) generated more than a dozen models, including policy advocates, ideologues, highflyers, specialists, generalists, status seekers, and spectators.

Model of representation: A means for understanding the way in which elected officials represent the interests of their voters and districts.

Although such models offer useful points of reference and provide comparative insights into the way that members of legislatures work in different locations (in time and space), it has become increasingly clear that many elected officials

Role	Features
Delegate	Representatives act as delegates for the preferences of those who elected them, no matter what the broader national interest.
Trustee	Representatives use their best judgement and experience to act in what they see as the best interests of their voters or their district.
Partisan	Representatives are members of a party and are expected to make decisions in line with party policy.
Mediator	Representatives must mediate between government and voters, aggregating citizens into representable constituencies.

Figure 9.5 Models of representation

are best understood less on the basis of how they relate to voters or parties, and more as a governing elite (see *Using Theory 9*). The amateur politicians of the past have often given way to **career politicians** who know no other job, and who may have become part of a **political class** with a background and interests removed from voters, and often captured by particular interests. While career politicians often have valuable experience, their rise can be interpreted as a threat to representative democracy, particularly if they do not reflect the diversity and interests of their voters. The existence of a political class makes it harder for many people to run for political office and creates a body of legislators who think and behave in a similar manner (Allen, 2018).

Career politician: A legislator with limited experience outside politics who expects politics to provide a full-time, fulfilling profession.

Political class: A group of professional politicians with similar backgrounds, interests, and values.

Another concern with representation has been the historical domination of legislatures by men. Although the number of women representatives has been growing, few states have achieved gender equality, and many still fall far short (see Figure 9.6). There are several possible reasons for this, some specific to particular states and cultures, others more universal:

- Many men are still not ready to vote women into office.
- Women face more obstacles in accessing the resources needed to run for office, or in being selected as candidates by major political parties.
- Women are less likely than men to think they are qualified to run for office, and are also less competitive and more risk averse than men (Lawless and Fox, 2012).
- In some countries (mainly in the Middle East) women are barred from running for elective office. It was only in 2015 that the first women were elected into public office in Saudi Arabia, for example. In Yemen, meanwhile, out of 301 members of the lower chamber of the legislature (the Majlis) in 2020, just one was a woman.
- Legislatures are **gendered institutions**, meaning that they still advantage men over women by, for example, having working hours that are unwelcoming to women with more than their fair share of family responsibilities (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer, 2012).

Gendered institution: A body that operates with formal rules and informal conventions which, intentionally or unintentionally, advantage men over women.

More than 75 countries (Hughes et al., 2017) have adopted formal means to increase the number of women in legislatures, but this is a relatively recent development. Of the three main methods, the oldest and rarest is *reserved seats*, by which a party selects women members for special seats granted in proportion to its share of the vote; the more seats a party wins in the general election, the more reserved seats it is allocated. In Pakistan, for example, 60 of the 342 seats

USING THEORY 9

Elite theory: The theory that power in a society is wielded by a minority, whose members have advantages that may be based on wealth, age, race, gender, education, or some combination of these.

ELITE THEORY

One of the most consistent criticisms made about governments is that they have lost touch with the citizens they are supposed to represent, and that they have instead become part of government by a ruling elite. Legislatures are just as much the target of this kind of complaint as executives, even though they are the political institutions that tend to be closest to citizens and voters; in theory, at least, representatives are easier to contact than presidents, prime ministers, or judges. In practice, though, representatives are often seen as distant, and as being more interested in listening to party leaders or special interests than to voters.

Elite theory approaches government from the perspective that a minority of people with particular qualities and skills come to dominate the decision-making process. It has a long history, dating back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the work of the Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto and the German sociologist Robert Michels. It has long been questioned whether or not 'the elite' is a single group of people – a ruling class – or a cluster of different groups that compete with one another for power and influence. The latter is more likely given that the definition of elitism varies by time and place: in some instances, it could be argued that all it takes to be a member of the elite is to be a male and well-educated member of the dominant ethnic or religious group, while in others a combination of wealth, heredity, and position comes into play:

- One of the leading exponents of elite theory, the American sociologist C. Wright Mills, suggested in his 1956 book *The Power Elite* that – at least in the United States of the 1950s – government was controlled by a combination of business, military, and political leaders. He might also have pointed out, but did not, that they were mainly white males. Although the diversity of elite groups has since grown in the United States, there is still much truth to the idea that business, the military, and political leaders dominate.
- In sub-Saharan Africa, meanwhile, with its multiple social divisions, members of the elite will include those ranged around the leadership, who are likely to come from the dominant ethnic group in a given country and to be professionals with an urban base.
- In China, elite politics is based around a combination of the upper reaches of the Chinese Communist Party, the bureaucracy, and the military, along with the emerging class of wealthy entrepreneurs.

The first steps in applying elite theory to an understanding of government and politics must be to identify the people who constitute the elite, the qualities they have that place them within the elite, and the manner in which they exploit those qualities to influence government. This is not always as easy as it might at first seem.

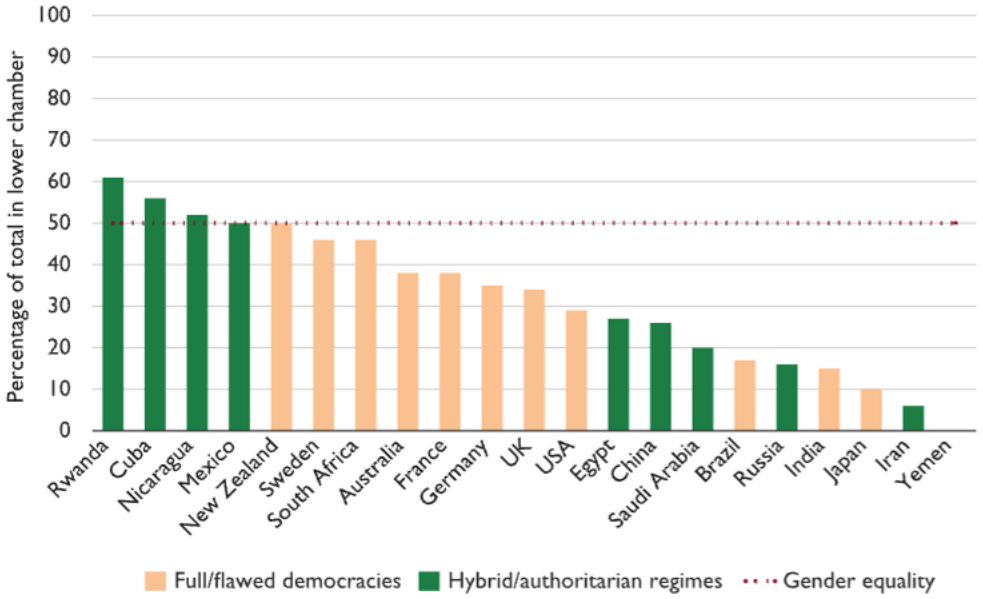

Figure 9.6 Comparing the number of women in legislatures
Source: Based on data in Inter-Parliamentary Union (2024).

in the National Assembly are reserved for women. The method is also used in Rwanda, which has the world's highest proportion of female legislators. There, 24 of 80 seats in the Chamber of Deputies are reserved for women; other female candidates are elected directly.

The second and most common method is the *party quota*. Prevalent in Europe, where the use of proportional representation and party lists is most common (see Chapter 14), this occurs when a party adopts a quota (typically in the range of 25–50 per cent) for the number of women candidates it fields (or, more neutrally, for candidates from each gender). To forestall a token effort, additional stipulations may require some women to be placed high on a party's list (in party list electoral systems), or to be selected for winnable districts (in plurality systems).

The third and most recent method, which is common in Latin America, is the *legal mandate*. This is similar to the party quota except that it is mandated by law and applies to all parties. Argentina was the first country to adopt such a law, in 1991, since when almost every other Latin American country has followed suit. The requirements range from 50 per cent in Bolivia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, and Panama to 30 per cent in Argentina and Brazil, and 20 per cent in Paraguay (Piscopo, 2015). Setting a target, though, does not necessarily mean achieving that target. Brazil, for example, set a 30 per cent mandate in 1997, but only 18 per cent of Senators in 2023 were women, and only 17 per cent of members of the House of Representatives. The handicaps, note Wylie and dos Santos (2016), include giving women candidates fewer resources for their campaigns, and running them in districts that they cannot win.

Even though many countries now have gender quotas, remarkably little is understood about their impact on the number of women elected or appointed to higher political office. Critics have argued that quotas undermine women, because they might be seen as a form of political stigma that compromises

the ability of women to be treated in government as the equal of men, and to undermine the idea of leadership based on merit. A study by O'Brien and Rickne (2016), however, using Sweden as a case, finds that quotas increase not just the number of women in legislatures, but also the number of female politicians able to use this as a launchpad for higher office.

LEGISLATURES IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

In January 2021, global headlines were dominated by the remarkable sight of supporters of Donald Trump storming the United States Congress in an effort to overturn Trump's loss in the presidential election. As this happened, frequent comparisons were made in the media to similar events in authoritarian regimes. Whether sparked by unsuccessful candidates egging on their supporters to protest the outcome of an election, or by opponents of an authoritarian regime seeking to foment a revolt, attacks on legislatures – while highly unusual in democracies – are not uncommon elsewhere. Consider these examples:

- In Burkina Faso in October 2014, demonstrations against an attempt by President Blaise Compaoré to extend his 27 years of rule escalated into a storming of the national Parliament, including the ransacking of offices, and setting fire to buildings, documents, and vehicles. Compaoré resigned and fled into exile in neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire.
- In Ecuador in October 2019, demonstrations against economic austerity policies led to a brief occupation of the National Assembly in Quito, ending only when protestors were driven out by police using tear gas.
- In Guatemala in November 2020, protests against the budget led to an attack on the national Congress, with protestors entering the building and setting parts of it on fire.
- Similar confrontations have happened in recent years in Bolivia, Haiti, and Nicaragua, among other places.

These kinds of sometimes violent confrontations reflect the frustration that citizens in authoritarian regimes can have with government, and the perception that legislatures are a relatively easy target for confrontations, given that they are usually surrounded by less security than executives. There is also the hope among demonstrators that they can encourage representatives to join them in opposition to the leadership, although this rarely happens: the role of legislatures in authoritarian regimes is not well understood, because authoritarian regimes are much less transparent than their democratic equivalents, making it harder to learn about their internal workings and to access the kind of information needed to better understand them. Were demonstrators to better understand the place of legislatures in authoritarian government, they might be less optimistic about their chances of swinging these institutions around to the side of the opposition.

Except for a few outliers such as Saudi Arabia, all authoritarian regimes have legislatures of some sort, although they range in form from those in which one party controls all or most seats (as in China) to those in which opposition parties win enough seats to give them a voice without giving them control. Gandhi et al. (2020) argue that most studies of authoritarian legislatures take one of three

analytical perspectives. The first is to dismiss them as little more than superficial bodies whose existence provides a veneer of democracy while mainly serving a rubber-stamp function, with floor votes that usually come down unanimously in support of the government. While this is a tempting conclusion, though, it has been questioned, with Allmark (2012), for example, finding in his study of ten countries (including Myanmar, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Syria) that legislatures can sometimes be platforms for dissent, can help strengthen the domestic opposition, and can promote the political education of citizens.

The second perspective is to see authoritarian legislatures as having the potential to evolve into democratic bodies, the only difference between them and their democratic counterparts being one of degree. The internal structure of authoritarian legislatures has many of the same features of those in democracies, including committee systems, the formation of policy coalitions, and alignment with groups and actors outside the executive. At the same time, though, representatives in authoritarian legislatures are less concerned about re-election than their democratic peers, can use illegal means to ensure their continuance in office, and will be more interested in keeping the ruling elite content than in answering to voters. As Gandhi et al. (2020) put it, legislatures in dictatorships are rarely autonomous from the executive, and in fact are often extensions of the ruling party or the executive.

The third perspective takes a middle road by suggesting that authoritarian legislatures engage in politics by acting as forums in which power can be shared and opposing viewpoints expressed, but only in a way that supports the interests of elites. In other words, 'nominally democratic institutions serve distinctively authoritarian ends' (Gandhi et al., 2020). This perspective builds on a growing sense that the role of authoritarian legislatures is more nuanced and sophisticated than was once thought. Early signs of this were reflected in the tendency identified by Schuler and Malesky (2014) for scholars to see authoritarian leaders relying less on repression and more on using legislatures to either co-opt (see below), empower, or weaken the opposition.

In their study of authoritarian institutions and women's rights, for example, Donno and Kreft (2019) find that while dictatorships perform worse than democracies in terms of human rights, many have actually done surprisingly well in terms of using law to advance women's rights. This is because advancing the rights of women can be seen as a less threatening channel of political reform than, for example, allowing multiple political parties (which brings the opposition into the open) or holding fair elections (which raises the risk of losing power) or even manipulating elections (which takes time and effort, and perhaps outright repression). By contrast, improved gender equality can reduce the risk of violent opposition to a regime, expanding the size of its support coalition. Creating women's wings for ruling parties, using gender quotas, and passing laws on violence against women or sexual harassment are all ways in which a ruling party can use a legislature to make concessions and to bolster its dominance without sacrificing control.

Among the potential or actual roles played by authoritarian legislatures (summarized in Figure 9.7), the most important is **co-option**. Authoritarian leaders may not have to worry too much about public opinion, but they always face the prospect of challenges from within the elite, or at least of demands for a

Co-option (or co-optation): The process by which leaders encourage political movements or opponents to become part of the governing system, thereby neutralizing opposition.

share of the spoils of control. For that reason, it may be tactically better for rulers to try and neutralize opponents by bringing them into the fold of government. As Stromseth et al. (2017) put it: 'Giving an opposition figure a seat at the table and a nice salary as a delegate is a way to co-opt potential troublemakers.' By doing so, authoritarian leaders can improve their chances of maintaining control, offsetting the kind of opposition that could potentially destabilize or threaten the existence of their regime. As one of the characters in the film *The Godfather* put it: 'Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer.'

The second role played by authoritarian legislatures is that of acting as a channel for the recruitment of new members of the elite, while also testing their reliability to the governing regime. New blood needs to be recruited into any system of government, whether democratic or authoritarian, and it is not hard to see how an authoritarian leader could use a legislature as a recruiting pool, observing the performance of representatives and differentiating between those who might support the goals of the regime and those who are hardcore opponents.

The third role played by authoritarian legislatures is a means by which concessions can be made to opponents and critics without threatening the foundations of the governing regime. This phenomenon has been described as **consultative authoritarianism** (Teets, 2013), and is illustrated by a study of online participation portals (government websites through which people can post comments) set up by the National People's Congress (NPC) in China (Truex, 2014). This found that while they generated greater feelings of satisfaction with the regime among users, and a greater sense of responsiveness, this only applied to users who were less educated and more politically excluded. Another study, this one of the National Assembly of Vietnam (Schuler, 2021), suggested that the apparent willingness to listen to opposing points of view was less about hearing what ordinary citizens had to say than about allowing debate within the ruling communist party while also identifying and taking down rivals.

Consultative authoritarianism: The idea that legislatures in authoritarian regimes are used by leaders to give a sense that the regime is prepared to listen to its critics and opponents (up to a point).

The case of China exemplifies the trend in one-party states for legislatures to acquire modest significance as such regimes become slightly more open to multiple ideas. A growing emphasis on the rule of law has raised the status of the NPC, which has more often expressed popular hostility to corruption. Many votes are no longer unanimous, proceedings are less easily choreographed, committees are growing in authority, some professional support is available, and the Communist Party must anticipate the NPC's reaction to its proposals.

However, the NPC, still the world's largest legislature with nearly 3,000 members indirectly elected through sub-national governments and the military,

Role	*Features*
Co-option	Incorporating moderate opponents into the governing system.
Recruitment	Providing a pool of potential recruits to the elite and working as a useful initial test of reliability.
Concessions	For dictators, argues Gandhi (2008), legislatures serve channels through which groups can make demands and leaders can 'make concessions without appearing to cave in to popular protest'.

Figure 9.7 Legislatures in authoritarian regimes

VCG / Contributor

The sheer size of the National People's Congress of China never fails to impress, but it is not a reflection of the power of the institution, which meets only once annually to mainly approve communist party decisions.

remains strongly hierarchical. It meets only once a year for a session lasting about two weeks, as a result of which the NPC's influence – even more than in committee-based legislatures in democracies – operates through smaller sub-groups. The most important of these is the Standing Committee, a group of about 150 members which meets regularly throughout the year, giving the party leadership an additional means of control.

Referring back to the idea of Potemkin villages described in Chapter 7, there is usually much less to authoritarian legislatures than meets the eye, as illustrated by the case of Egypt. In one form or another, there has been a legislature there since 1923, but the executive has always had the capacity to override its votes or to manipulate elections to ensure a majority of friendly legislators. The legislature was called Parliament until 1971, when it was renamed the People's Assembly (Maglis El Nowwab) and was granted several constitutional powers that seemed to limit those of the president: it could reject laws proposed by the government, propose laws of its own, had close control over the national budget, and could debate government policy. The changes meant little in real terms, however, and its debates were once colourfully described by Waterbury (1983) as follows: 'The normal pattern … has been to tear a given policy to pieces in committee … to give ample (media) coverage to the findings, and then to have the Assembly as a whole approve the policy with marginal modifications.'

The Assembly was replaced in 2014 by a new House of Representatives, but the Egyptian tradition of strong executives and relatively weak legislatures seemed destined to continue, but for different reasons. Where the old People's Assembly was dominated by the governing National Democratic Party, which was in turn controlled by the president, the new legislature suffers from too

many parties: nearly 20 won seats at the 2015 elections, while nearly 60 per cent of deputies chose to sit as independents, and voter turnout – in protest at the government of President El-Sisi – was a paltry 10 per cent. Matters did not improve much in 2020: 13 parties won seats (with the governing Nation's Future party winning more than half of them), 20 per cent of deputies sat as independents, and turnout was just under 30 per cent. As a result, the Egyptian legislature is ineffective as a site of opposition to the government.

Overall, the relationship between legislatures, presidential monarchs, and ruling parties is less than clear. Dictators can stay in power by ensuring that the ruling party has a solid grip on the majority of seats in the legislature (using illegal means to manipulate elections if necessary), or by ensuring that most of the significant powers in government rest with the executive. Wright and Escribà-Folch (2012) also note that legislatures can help keep a dictator in power 'by making the dictator's promises – to both potential authoritarian rivals and would-be democrats – more credible'. They might thus bolster a dictator by decreasing both the likelihood of the incumbent being replaced by a rival and the chances of democratization. On the other hand, if rivals are not interested in democratization, but are more interested in replacing one dictator with another, then legislatures can have the effect of destabilizing an authoritarian leader. In short, a dictator must be careful to balance the impression of caring about opposing opinions with that of keeping a tight rein on the opposition.

The case of Russia under Vladimir Putin shows an authoritarian leader maintaining control in a multi-party system through the clear manipulation of the legislature. He has particularly targeted the upper house, the Federation Council, helped by the lack of detail in the Russian constitution about how its members should be chosen; Article 95 says only that the Council should have two representatives from each of the 85 'subjects' (regions and republics) of Russia, 'one from the legislative and one from the executive body of state authority'. At first, they were elected, but by 1995 the membership had been replaced by the incumbent executives and the heads of the legislatures of the regions.

Just after first becoming president in 2000, and in an attempt to limit the powers of the regional leaders, Putin steered a new law through the State Duma that replaced them with full-time representatives appointed by local legislatures and their executives. Another change came in 2012, whereby one member from each subject would be elected by members of the local legislature, and a second chosen by local governors. In practice, though, Putin's advisors have the final say over the selection of members (Slider, 2019). Since the Federation Council must approve presidential nominees to the Russian high courts, and must approve the declaration of martial law or emergencies by the president, Putin – by extension – controls these decisions.

In summary, legislatures in authoritarian regimes are relatively hollowed-out institutions. Even in democratic regimes, there is often less to them than might intuitively be thought, but at least there is something of a balance between the executive and the legislature, which provides an important foundation for the foundations of government. In authoritarian systems, though, the balance of power more clearly lies with the executive, and legislatures function mainly as tools of the leaders rather than as complements to the legislative and representative process.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Which of the three roles carried out by democratic legislatures are (a) the most important, and (b) the most influential?
- Could a legislature made up entirely of rural and middle-aged men of the same religion and ethnicity effectively represent a country? If not, why not?
- Other than in federal systems, do bicameral legislatures serve any real purpose?
- Which of the four models of representation outlined in this chapter do you find most compelling, either as an explanatory tool or as a guiding principle?
- Term limits: Good idea or bad?
- Are executives the only institutions that really count in authoritarian systems, or do the three roles associated with legislatures suggest that they are more important than we might at first assume?

KEY CONCEPTS

- Bicameral
- Career politician
- Censure motion
- Collective representation
- Consultative authoritarianism
- Descriptive representation
- Co-option
- Elite theory
- Gendered institution
- Impeachment
- Legislature
- Model of representation
- Oversight
- Political class
- Recall
- Strong bicameralism
- Term limits
- Unicameral
- Vote of confidence
- Weak bicameralism

FURTHER READING

Arter, David (ed.) (2013) *Comparing and Classifying Legislatures* (Routledge). A survey of the state of knowledge about legislatures, with chapters on European, Latin American, and African cases.

Blomgren, Magnus, and Olivier Rozenberg (eds) (2012) *Parliamentary Roles in Modern Legislatures* (Routledge). An edited collection on the different roles played by members of parliament, using cases in Europe, Australia, and New Zealand.

Fish, M. Stephen, and Matthew Kroenig (2011) *The Handbook of National Legislatures: A Global Survey* (Cambridge University Press). An extensive reference work assessing the powers of national legislatures by their autonomy, capacity, influence, and powers.

Khmelko, Irina, Rick Stapenhurst, and Michael L. Mezey (eds) (2020) *Legislative Decline in the 21st Century: A Comparative Perspective* (Routledge). An edited collection with cases from more than a dozen countries, investigating the idea that the power of legislatures is declining.

Loewenberg, Gerhard (2016) *On Legislatures: The Puzzle of Representation* (Routledge). A review of some of the puzzles and contradictions inherent in the way that legislatures work.

Martin, Shane, Thomas Saalfeld, and Kaare W. Strøm (eds) (2014) *The Oxford Handbook of Legislative Studies* (Oxford University Press). A comprehensive edited collection of essays on legislatures.

ONLINE RESOURCES

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SPOTLIGHT 9
UNITED KINGDOM

PROFILE

One of the world's oldest states, and birthplace of the parliamentary system, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and its four constituent parts (England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland) has undergone many changes since 1945 that have left troubling questions hanging over its future. The end of empire, the creation and then the revision of a welfare state, and the country's declining economic and military weight have forced a redefinition of the role of government, and of Britain's place in the world. A failed independence referendum in Scotland in 2014 has not ended the debate over the future of the union, and the shock decision by voters in a 2016 referendum to leave the European Union raised even more questions as successive Conservative governments struggled during 2017–23 to adjust to the effects of the exit against a background of economic problems and deep divisions in public opinion. The Conservatives paid the price in July 2024 when they were swept out of office in the wake of a landslide electorial victory by the opposition Labour Party.

Form of government	Unitary parliamentary constitutional monarchy. Date of state formation arguably 1066; no codified constitution.
Executive	Parliamentary. The head of government is the prime minister, who is head of the largest party or coalition, and governs in conjunction with a cabinet. The head of state is the monarch.
Legislature	Bicameral Parliament: lower House of Commons (650 members) elected for renewable five-year terms, and unelected upper House of Lords (about 790 members) consisting of a mix of hereditary and life peers, and senior members of the Church of England.
Judiciary	The creation in 2009 of a 12-member Supreme Court strengthened the autonomy of the judiciary. Judges must retire at age 70 or 75, depending on date of appointment.
Electoral system	The House of Commons is elected using single-member plurality. Different systems are used for elections to other bodies such as regional assemblies in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.
Parties	Two-party dominant. Multiple parties exist at national and regional, but system traditionally dominated by Conservatives on the right and Labour on the left.
Population	67 million
Gross Domestic Product	$3,090 billion
Per capita GDP	$46,125
Democracy Index rating	Full democracy
Freedom House rating	Free
Corruption score	71/100
Human Development Index rating	Very High

CASE STUDY: THE BRITISH PARLIAMENT

The British Parliament is often known as the Mother of Parliaments, being the model upon which legislatures in all other parliamentary systems are based. Traditionally, it mixed omnipotence and impotence in a seemingly impossible combination; it was considered omnipotent because parliamentary sovereignty, allied to an uncodified constitution, meant there was no higher authority in the land, but it was considered impotent because the governing party exercised tight control over its Members of Parliament (MPs) in the lower House of Commons, turning Parliament into an instrument, rather than a wielder, of power.

Fraser Hall

The Houses of Parliament in London. The parliamentary system was born in Britain, as a result of which most comparative studies of parliaments refer back to British precedent.

Parliament's position is today less certain. It has lost powers to the regions thanks to the work of the Northern Irish, Scottish, and Welsh parliaments, and its loss of powers to the European Parliament was one of the complaints lodged by pro-Brexit campaigners in favour of the UK leaving the EU. In the debate over Brexit, Parliament found itself in a fight with the administration of Prime Minister Theresa May (2016–19) that resulted in a greater assertion of parliamentary power.

MPs themselves have become more committed, they are increasingly drawn from professional and business backgrounds, they devote more time to an increasing amount of constituency casework, and the length of parliamentary sittings has been cut. The long-held view that Parliament was out of touch and old-fashioned has changed in recent years and it has become more assertive and effective, and more of a constraint on the government (Russell, 2016). At the same time, it has suffered from the same declining trust in government as many other legislatures. Meanwhile, the upper House of Lords continues to occupy an uncertain position. Its nearly 800 members are unelected, and consist mainly of appointed life peers, but efforts to reform the chamber have left it stuck between its traditional and undemocratic past and an unknown but potentially more democratic future. Even as Parliament updates its skills, it will continue to do what it does best: acting as an arena for debating issues of significance to the nation, its government, and its leaders.

Further reading

Besly, Nicolas, and Tom Goldsmith (2024) *How Parliament Works*, 9th edn (Routledge).

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10

Bureaucracies

CONTENTS

- Understanding bureaucracies
- Origins and evolution
- How bureaucrats are organized
- How bureaucracies are recruited
- Bureaucracies in authoritarian regimes

PREVIEW

As the networks of institutions responsible for administration, bureaucracies are a key part of the structure of government. They are also the only part of the government with which most of us have much direct contact, whether we are applying for a driving licence, paying our taxes, or buying property. In spite of this combination of importance and familiarity, bureaucracies are routinely misunderstood, and as often criticized for their failings as praised for their achievements.

Rarely formally studied until Max Weber turned his attention to them in the early twentieth century, the stereotype of bureaucracies is that they are hierarchical, driven by procedure, and unresponsive to customer needs. This view is simplistic, and in order to better grasp their realities, we need to better understand their dynamics, their structures, the political and professional pressures that come to bear on their work, and how they are changing.

This chapter begins with a review of the core features of bureaucracies and how they compare. It then looks at their evolution, taking the story through to the growth of e-government. It then looks at how bureaucracies are organized in democracies, ranging from government departments down through the divisions within each department to the non-departmental public bodies that are increasingly used to deliver public services. The chapter then looks at how bureaucrats are recruited and kept accountable, and ends with a review of the dynamics of bureaucracies in authoritarian regimes, which have some surprising similarities (as well as important differences) with their democratic peers.

HIGHLIGHTS

- The main roles of bureaucracies are to give advice and to implement policy, but how well they do this varies from one country to another.
- Weber's model of bureaucracy is the traditional starting point for understanding the modern bureaucracy.
- Outsourcing and e-government have changed the way in which bureaucracies work and relate to the public.
- In democratic regimes, the public sector is a complex network encompassing departments, divisions, and regulatory agencies.
- Two key factors determine the quality of public employees: how they are recruited, and how they are kept accountable.
- Bureaucracies are among the exceptions to the rule of marginal political institutions in authoritarian regimes. Dictators cannot dictate without officials to give effect to their will.

UNDERSTANDING BUREAUCRACIES

New Zealand is a country that routinely ranks at the top of comparative political, economic, and social rankings. It has one of the highest rankings, for example, in the Democracy Index, *Freedom in the World*, and the World Development Index, usually alongside a cluster of Nordic countries. Part of the explanation for its success lies in the reforms New Zealand has recently made to its public bureaucracy, dating back to the late 1980s, and continuing in 2020 with the passage of the Public Service Act (Hunt, 2019). The goal behind this most recent change was to strengthen links across government departments, to set clear policy goals, and to allow bureaucrats to move more easily between agencies. The new law also sets up joint ventures that bring together the chief executives of agencies to address high-priority issues such as child poverty and climate change. (It also helps that New Zealand is a relatively small country, with a population just under 5 million.)

The study of the **bureaucracy** (also known as the civil service) focuses on the networks of government departments and public agencies that underpin political executive. These networks have two main jobs: they give advice and assistance to politicians before policy is made, and – through a process sometimes known as **public administration** – they help to implement laws and policies once agreed (see Figure 10.1). The head of a department supplying data to a government minister or secretary, the inspector of revenues checking tax returns, the engineer trying to work out the cause of a plane crash, the person answering the phones when we contact a government agency; all of these are part of the system that is the public bureaucracy.

Bureaucracy: Literally, rule by officials. In the context of comparative politics, describes the people and organizations who form the public administration.

Public administration: The implementation of government policy.

Studies of the bureaucracy have traditionally focused on the permanent salaried employees of government departments. However, attention has increasingly focused on the wider system of governance: on semi-independent agencies, local governments, and even the non-governmental organizations and the private corporations to which the delivery of public programmes is increasingly outsourced. While the term *bureaucracy* is often limited to these public networks, terms such as *public administration* and *public management* are used to describe the public sector in a wider sense. The idea of bureaucracy can be extended further: the administrative staff of any large organization – such as a university, a political

Role	*Features*
Advice	Providing advice and information to political leaders as part of the policy process.
Implementation	Overseeing – and ensuring consistency in – the implementation of laws, regulations, and policies.
Information	Gathering, collating, and assessing information on public issues.
Dispute resolution	Settling disputes within government departments and between government and citizens.

Figure 10.1 Bureaucracies in democratic regimes

party, or a corporation – can be considered a bureaucracy, and the personality of the organizations of which they are a part gives them many of the same incentives, limitations, and motives that we find in the public bureaucracy.

In order to understand bureaucracies, we need to know how they are structured, how their staff are recruited and held accountable, how departments work with one another, and how services are provided. Seeking out the best recruits and then giving employees of public agencies – particularly those at the less skilled and lower paid end of the spectrum – a sense of mission and a desire to serve is not easy. Professionals providing a key public service – such as doctors and nurses in a public health system – will have the highest sense of mission, but the stereotypical view of clerical bureaucrats pushing paper (literally or metaphorically) and tying up services in **red tape** still often holds true.

Red tape: The classic image of bureaucracies tied up in procedure and rules, deriving from the habit in some sixteenth-century European countries of binding administrative documents in red tape.

Fairly or unfairly, bureaucrats are often associated with rigidity, hierarchy, a lack of creativity, and a focus on procedures that have worked in the past rather than an ability to think imaginatively and change with the times. Bureaucracies have undergone substantial changes in recent decades, however, due to pressures to reform the delivery of public services. As we will see later in this chapter, there are two major themes in understanding the modern bureaucracy (in wealthier democracies at least): the outsourcing that has led to many services being transferred to private contractors, and the switch to a reliance on the provision of information and services through the internet.

A picture of the quality of bureaucracies is painted by the Worldwide Governance Indicators compiled by the World Bank. One of its six indicators

primeimages

The economic successes of the southeast Asian city state of Singapore are credited in part to the efficiency of its bureaucracy.

is government effectiveness, which it defines as '*perceptions* (emphasis added) of the quality of public services, [and] the quality of the civil service and the degree of its independence from political pressures'. The indicators are compiled from a variety of sources, including opinion surveys and the impressions gleaned by non-governmental organizations, commercial information providers such as the Economist Intelligence Unit (which produces the Democracy Index), and public sector organizations such as regional development banks.

Selected results from the 2021 survey are shown in Figure 10.2. Care needs to be taken with how they are understood, given that they are based on perceptions; it is perhaps predictable that democratic regimes overall place well and that authoritarian regimes (many of which are also failing states) overall do not. It is also predictable that the Nordic states top the list (although Singapore outscores them with a perfect 100), while the world's most troubled states languish at the bottom (Haiti scores 0.96, while South Sudan scores a

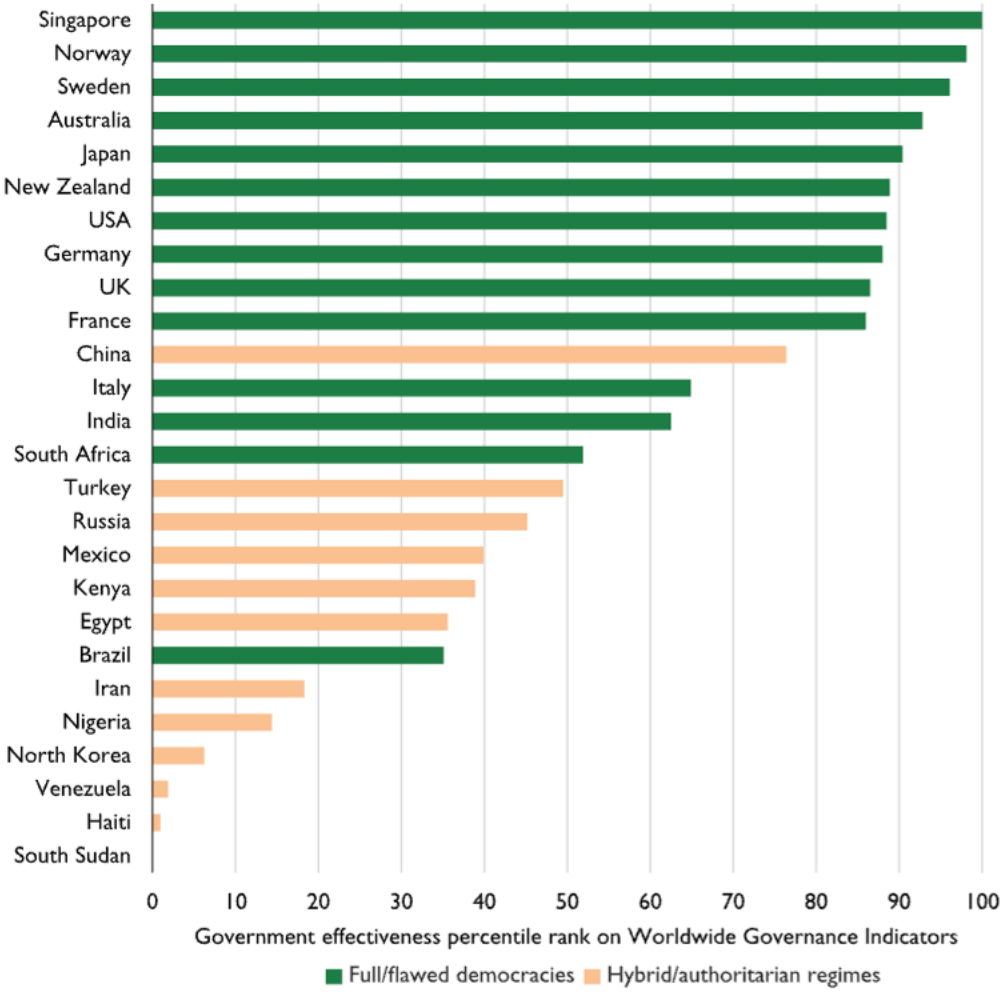

Figure 10.2 Comparing government effectiveness

Source: Based on data for 2021 in World Bank (2024). Countries are scored on a scale between 100 (best) and 0 (worst).

zero). As with so many of these ranking systems, though, no explanations are provided for relative positions, and the search for those explanations is hindered by the varied quality and quantity of the research that has been done on bureaucracies.

One notable exception to the general rule of strong European bureaucracies is offered by the case of Italy, which has a government effectiveness score of 65, more than 30 points below that of Norway and even ten points below that of China. It is well understood that many of Italy's recent political and economic problems have stemmed from a bureaucracy that is slow, inefficient, often corrupt, and often acts as a drag on the country's economic health. In their study of the Italian bureaucracy, Codogno and Galli (2022) use terms such as *inertia*, *inefficient*, *obscure*, and *burdensome* to describe its role, describe it as a 'formidable obstacle to competition', and point to the two failed efforts made by the government (in 2006 and 2016) to give more stability to government through constitutional reforms that were rejected by voters in referendums. Partly as a result of these problems, Italy ranks near Albania and Bulgaria with the lowest government effectiveness score in Europe, and ranks 58th in the world (below even China and Russia) in the World Bank's Doing Business Index (see Chapter 17).

By contrast, a notable exception to the general rule of weaker bureaucracies in weaker democracies is offered by Singapore. It ranks as a flawed democracy, and has been just a fraction away from being downgraded to a hybrid regime in recent issues of the Democracy Index, and yet it has a score of 100 on government effectiveness. The reasons are many, but they include a combination of having inherited the efficiencies of the British civil service, the advantages of the small size and scale of Singapore as a unitary city-state (with a population just under 6 million), a policy of recruiting and training talented staff and of encouraging good leadership, clear goals, and structured feedback on the work of government departments (Wang, 2020).

At least part of the explanation behind the mixed view of bureaucrats in general relates to accountability (see *Exploring Problems 10*). While political leaders (in democracies, at least) can be removed through elections, are constantly watched and assessed by the media, and find their political standing rising or falling in concert with opinion polls, bureaucrats mainly answer only to the departments or agencies in which they are employed. As a result, keeping bureaucrats accountable often rests on informal channels, including **whistleblowing**.

Whistleblowing: A decision by a person (or a group of people) to go public with a problem of wrongdoing in a government department (or any large organization), including fraud, corruption, or inefficiency.

Although this has often revealed examples of abuse, fraud, and waste in government departments and agencies, it relies too much on opportunism rather than on a structured means of keeping bureaucrats accountable. It also tends to reveal problems after they have happened, when it would be more efficient for structures to be designed in such a way as to prevent problems from emerging in the first place. Finally, it can be a high-risk and high-cost option, as reflected in one of the most famous recent examples of whistleblowing: the revelations by Edward Snowden, a computer consultant employed by US national security agencies, who in 2013 went public with thousands of classified documents on the US surveillance system, and has since been obliged to live in exile in Russia.

EXPLORING PROBLEMS 10

HOW CAN WE KEEP BUREAUCRATS ACCOUNTABLE?

In the campaign that led up to the June 2016 Brexit vote in Britain, one of the complaints most often levelled at the European Union (EU) was that it was run by 'unelected and unaccountable' bureaucrats. This was a deceptive argument, however, because none of the staff of government departments in EU member states are elected, while senior staff in the EU institutions are appointed by elected governments, just as they are in national government. EU bureaucrats are instead indirectly accountable, because – like most career bureaucrats elsewhere – they answer to the governments of the member states and the appointed leaders of EU institutions. Why, then, criticize them for lacking a quality that is lacked by all other bureaucracies?

Max Weber warned of the difficulties of keeping bureaucrats accountable, and of preventing them from obstructing the goals of elected governments. Commentators continue to recognize that the bureaucracy's expertise, permanence, scale, and control of implementation mean that it is bound to be more than a conduit for political directives. Increasingly, democratic governments have worked to broaden the interpretation of accountability, requiring senior officials to defend their behaviour, rather than regarding them solely as advisers on – and executors of – political decisions. In this way, accountability both acknowledges and potentially defuses Weber's fear of bureaucratic power.

Specifically, senior officials are made accountable not only to ministers in their own departments, but also to the executive, to the legislatures that usually control the purse strings, to legislative committees, and even to courts. Finally, outsourcing has helped changed the channels of accountability, because issuing and renewing contracts is tied directly to performance.

A distinctively European tool of accountability is the **ombudsman**. A public watchdog that investigates claims of maladministration, the first ombudsman was created in Sweden in 1809, but the idea was not emulated elsewhere until much later: 1919 in Finland, after 1945 in other democracies, and 1995 in the European Union (see Hoffmann and Ziller, 2017). Ombudsman offices are now found in about 90 countries, but most work at the local or sectional level; states with a national ombudsman include most European countries as well as Argentina, Australia, Botswana, Gambia, Indonesia, New Zealand, Nigeria, and Peru. A single advocate may cover the entire public sector, or separate commissioners may be appointed for specific areas.

Ombudsman: A public official appointed by a legislature to investigate allegations of maladministration in the public sector.

- What are the best means for holding bureaucrats accountable?
- Could more countries stand to adopt the idea of an ombudsman, or is there more to be gained by outsourcing (see later in this chapter)?
- Is it enough to keep bureaucrats indirectly accountable through the politically appointed heads of departments and agencies?

ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

Meritocracy: A system in which career advancement and leadership are based on talent, qualifications, and achievement.

Ancient kingdoms and empires often had some form of bureaucracy, perhaps the most famous being that of China. Based on principles set down by Confucius in the sixth century BCE, China established the first **meritocracy**, with bureaucrats earning their positions through examination and being used by emperors to run the country (a relationship that generally worked well in good times, but collapsed occasionally in bad times, as in the wake of war). In medieval Europe, meanwhile, clerical servants were agents of the royal household, serving under the personal direction of the monarch. When modern bureaucracies emerged, many of their features – including regular salaries, pensions, and open recruitment – arose from efforts to overcome this idea of public employment as personal service to the monarch.

The first systematic study of the modern bureaucracy was undertaken by the German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920), and many of his arguments still drive our understanding of its character. Weber's model was based on the institutional view of public administration as a disciplined hierarchy in which salaried officials who are recruited and promoted on merit reach rational decisions based on explicit rules and organized goals (see Figure 10.3). Weber's model saw public service as professional and legalistic, rather than managerial and business-like. His main claim was that bureaucracy made the operation of states more efficient, providing the means by which the techniques of industry and military organization could be brought to bear on civil affairs.

While Weber's ideas were influential in continental Europe, they were less so in North America, where civil services developed in a more pragmatic fashion. Lacking the European monarchical and state tradition, public management was at first considered to be a routine implementation of political decisions. In the United States, for example, the original philosophy was one of governance by the common person; almost every citizen, it was assumed, qualified for almost every public job. The idea of a professional civil service was considered elitist and undemocratic.

Feature	*Qualities*
Work	A carefully defined division of tasks.
Decisions	Reached by methodically applying rules to particular cases.
Recruitment	Based on proven (or, at least, potential) competence.
Careers	Competent officials can expect secure jobs and salaries, and promotion based on seniority and merit.
Structure	A disciplined hierarchy in which lower officials are subject to the authority of their superiors.

Figure 10.3 Weber's model of bureaucracy

This populist theory of bureaucracy conveniently underpinned the **spoils system**, a term deriving from the phrase 'to the victor belong the spoils', used in a speech made by US Senator William L. Marcy in 1832. In the United States, the system ensured that the election of a new president led to an almost complete turnover of employees in what was then a small federal government. It continued at least until 1883, when the Pendleton Act created a Civil Service Commission to recruit and regulate federal employees. In Canada, the merit principle was introduced in 1908 and adopted fully in the Civil Service Act 1918.

Spoils system: A patronage-based arrangement in which elected politicians distribute government jobs to those with the foresight to support the winning candidate.

Most countries followed a similar sequence in creating new government departments, a pattern that reflected the expansion of the state. The first were typically those responsible for finance, law and order, defence, and foreign affairs: Britain has a treasury dating back at least to the Norman invasion of 1066, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs can be traced back at least to the sixteenth century, and the United States has Departments of State and the Treasury dating from 1789. Later, countries added new departments to deal with new functions, including agriculture, trade, and labour.

The Great Depression and two world wars expanded the work of government, and therefore the size of bureaucracies. At the same time, the welfare state, completed in Western and especially Northern European countries in the decades following World War II (see Chapter 18), required a massive bureaucratic apparatus to distribute grants, allowances, and pensions, and new departments were created to deal with social security, education, health, and housing. These were followed by departments of the environment, founded in nearly every country since the late 1960s, and departments of women's affairs. By the 1970s, public employment accounted for almost one-third of the total workforce in Britain and the Nordic countries.

All was not well, though, because the closing decades of the twentieth century saw declining faith in bureaucratic solutions and growing calls for reform. One initiative in democracies came in the form of **outsourcing** government services. This built on a tradition that many governments had long had of relying on outside contractors to provide them with goods and supporting services. Outsourcing has grown as more jobs and services have been shifted out of government to the private sector, boosted partly by the internet but mainly by a desire on the part of governments to save money. Examples of outsourced tasks include the collection of garbage, water and wastewater treatment, security services, equipment servicing, technology support, the management of public schools and hospitals, and even the operation of private prisons.

Outsourcing: The practice of contracting private contractors to provide services previously under the control of the public bureaucracy.

The trend has had costs and benefits. On the positive side of the ledger, outsourcing means competition among potential contractors, which encourages efficiency and care for customer satisfaction, and helps bring down costs while also making it easier to terminate under-performing workers. On the negative side of the ledger, outsourcing can – without careful choices and monitoring – result in a reduction in the quality of services, and there is less direct and political accountability with private contractors. Also, private companies entering a field for the first time often have a smaller store of knowledge and experience than

older government departments. Finally, there is a limit to how much can be outsourced, because not all government services lend themselves to provision by private contractors (e.g. policing).

New public management: An approach to bureaucracy that emerged in the 1980s, based on the idea that market-oriented principles would make it more efficient.

Another reforming initiative came with a market-oriented approach to bureaucracy known as **new public management** (NPM). First introduced in the early 1980s by the Reagan administration in the United States and the Thatcher government in Britain, the goals of NPM were to use the methods of private companies to improve the efficiency and responsiveness of government departments, to improve the accountability of managers, and to cut public spending (Christensen and Lægreid, 2016). Among its ideas: splitting public organizations horizontally and vertically, and creating more autonomous agencies and more specialized 'single-purpose' agencies. Managers were allowed to operate more freely, and public and private providers were allowed to compete for government contracts. The significance of these reforms lay in the sharp break they represented with Weber's view that the job of a bureaucrat was simply to apply fixed rules to cases.

One of the pioneers of NPM was New Zealand. In the 1980s and 1990s, it undertook what was probably 'the most comprehensive and radical set of reforms of any Western democracy' (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017). One feature of the new model was its deep reliance on contracts, with private suppliers taking on even such sensitive areas as debt collection. By such means, the number of central government bureaucrats in New Zealand fell by almost 75 per cent between 1988 and 2000. In addition, contracts were introduced to govern the relationships between purchasers (e.g. the Transport Department) and providers (e.g. Transit New Zealand, responsible for roads). More reforms were introduced in 2020 (see earlier in this chapter) that were expected to continue building on New Zealand's strong record in public administration.

Although interest in NPM is now past its peak, its longer-term effects can still be felt, not least in changes in the numbers of bureaucrats; these are an indicator of the size of government, and of the extent to which different governments choose to provide services such as education and health care through public programmes. The data, to be sure, are patchy because of problems with recording and reporting, but the numbers for the wealthier members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development provide some hints (see Figure 10.4). The three Scandinavian states have the biggest public sectors when measured by share of employment, while South Korea and Japan have among the smallest. The Scandinavian numbers reflect the size and the extent of the welfare state in these countries, while the smaller numbers for Japan reflect the effects of three realities: the large number of bureaucrats who work at the local level, an active programme of privatization (including of corporations such as Japanese National Railways and the telecommunications company NTT), and scandals that have tainted the higher reaches of what was once regarded as an elite civil service.

E-government (or digital era governance): The use of information and communication technology to provide public services.

The newest trend in bureaucracy is **e-government**, built on the opportunities created by the internet to develop new channels of communication among and between governments, government departments, and citizens. These

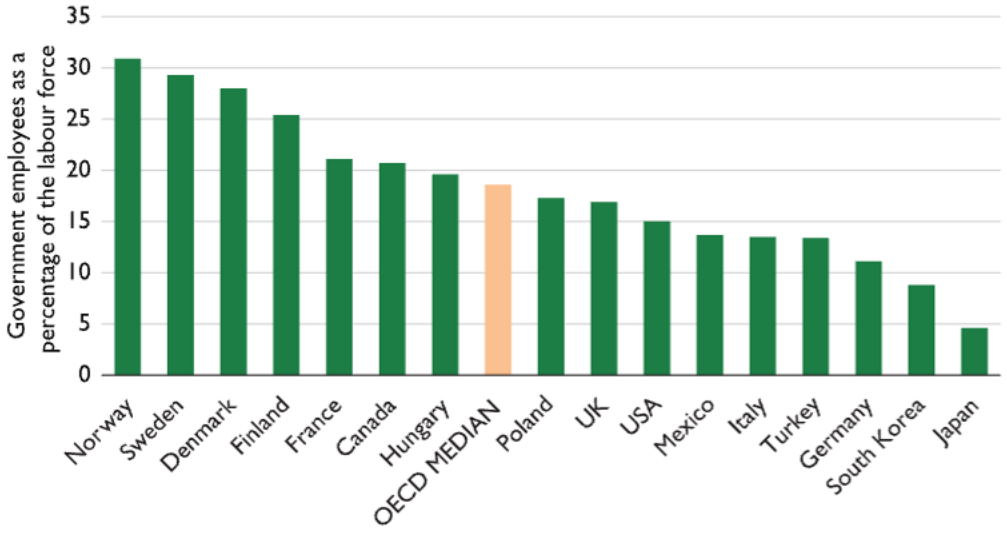

Figure 10.4 Comparing the size of bureaucracies

Source: Based on International Labour Organization, quoted in Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2023). Figures are for 2021.

allow citizens, for example, to search more immediately for information about government, to apply for benefits, or to make appointments. E-government is most advanced in wealthier countries with the most extensive internet access, and least advanced in poorer states with less developed infrastructure. Figure 10.5 shows the results for a selection of countries ranked for the effectiveness of the online delivery of government services in a periodic survey compiled by the United Nations.

As with outsourcing, there are costs and benefits to e-government. It can make it easier for citizens to access government departments and public information, as well as reducing government costs. However, it also increases the risk of cyberattacks on governments, makes it easier for governments to keep an eye on citizens, and provides new opportunities for political misuse such as the unauthorized transfer of data to third parties, including private companies and foreign states. Public suspicion of e-government is heightened by awareness that private electronic records – such as text messages, phone calls, and internet use – can be accessed by government in response to security threats.

It is also important to remember, as we will see in Chapter 12, that access to the internet remains unequal. The provision of fixed and wireless broadband services has almost reached saturation point in Europe, for example, but most of Africa lags behind. Even within countries, there is more access in more heavily populated regions and less access elsewhere. Australia provides an example of the latter phenomenon. While it has one of the most digitally connected governments in the world, with policies to expand e-government dating back to the mid-1990s, it is – as we will see in Chapter 11 – a large country with a few large concentrations of population, and small and widely dispersed rural populations that are not always easy to reach.

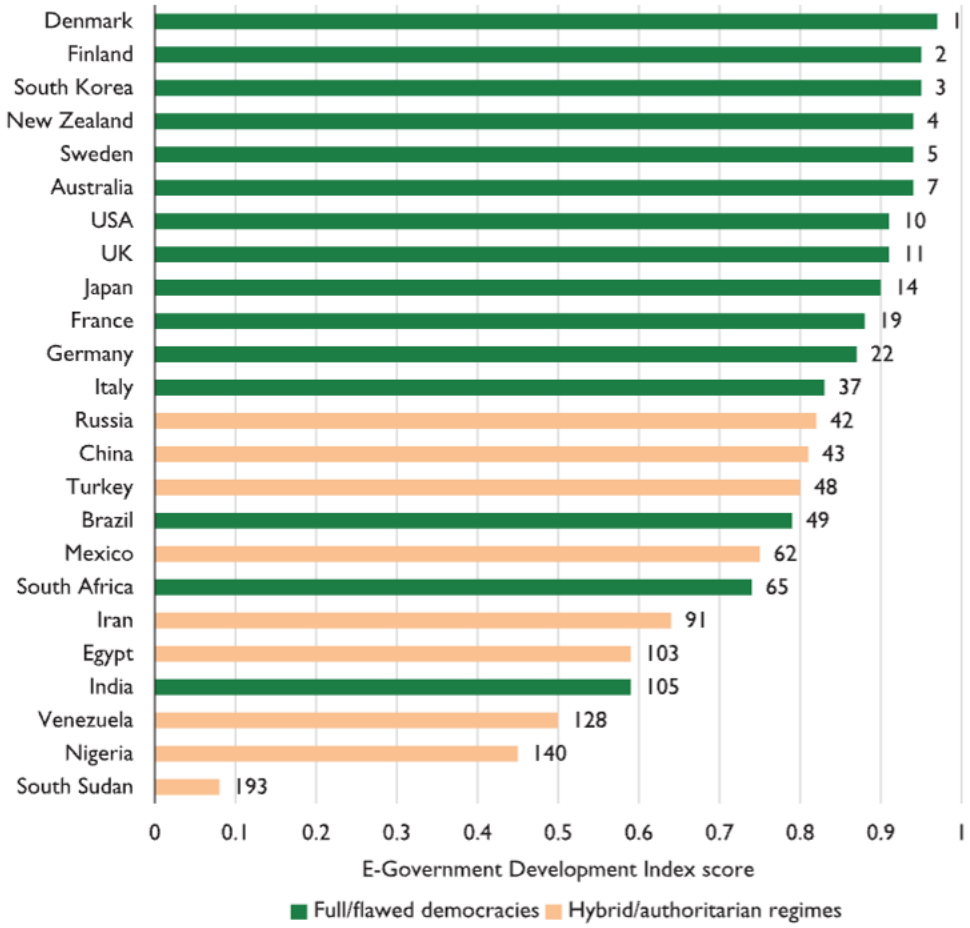

Figure 10.5 Comparing e-government

Source: Based on UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2022). Countries are scored on a scale between 1.0 (best) and 0.0 (worst). The scores are relative, not absolute. Figures at the end of each row indicate ranking. Data are based on the effectiveness of the online delivery of government services.

HOW BUREAUCRACIES ARE ORGANIZED

Just as executives, legislatures, and court systems come in different forms with different powers, so too do bureaucracies. Their structures and labels vary from one country to another, emphasizing the importance of taking structural factors into account when we study them (see *Using Theory 17*). There are three main levels of institution: departments, divisions, and non-departmental public bodies.

Department (or ministry): An administrative unit over which a secretary or minister exercises direct management control. Usually structured as a formal hierarchy, often established by statute, and usually having cabinet-level status.

Departments (or ministries)

The centrepiece of bureaucracies is what is known in some countries as a **department**, and in others as a ministry. The total number varies but is typically in the range of 12–24. There are almost always departments dealing with foreign affairs, internal affairs, the economy, justice, health care, and the environment, with others added depending on the list of policy areas considered important to the responsibilities of central government. These

departments also usually have cabinet-level status, meaning that they are headed by secretaries or ministers who are members of the cabinet or the council of ministers, which gives them a more central role in government and better access to the political executive.

Both the range of public activities and their organization in government vary across countries, which, for example, take different approaches to how they allocate responsibility for economic policy, finance, investment, and monetary affairs. Meanwhile, some countries have a department of culture but many do not, and the United States is unusual in having a cabinet-level Department of Veterans Affairs. Finally, departments will periodically be renamed, split, or combined according to changing circumstances, producing a changing departmental landscape. In 2016–20, for example, Britain had a department overseeing the country's exit from the European Union, while Japan in recent years has had a ministry dealing with education, culture, sports, science, and technology. (For more details on the Japanese bureaucracy, see *Spotlight 10* at the end of this chapter.)

Reflecting Weber's principles, the internal structure of government departments is usually hierarchical. At the top there are secretaries or ministers and their deputies, who are political appointees and who will come and go as they are reshuffled or as governments change. Below them sits the permanent career civil service, headed by a senior department official responsible both for administration and for providing the crucial bridge between political and administrative levels. In theory, secretaries direct and career bureaucrats execute, but the behavioural approach to comparison reveals that the reality is more complex and perhaps even disturbing. After all, permanent officials have the advantage over transient political secretaries of longer service, deeper experience, more information, and denser networks of peers in other departments. In these circumstances, providing the department with effective political leadership requires skills for which secretaries are usually inadequately prepared.

Two factors influence the degree of political control of a department. First, the greater the number of appointments made by a secretary within a department, the easier it is to impose a specific direction. Second, direction can be strengthened by providing secretaries with political advisory staff. Because such advisers do not form part of the department's permanent staff, they can act as their secretary's eyes and ears, reporting back on issues which might otherwise be lost in the official hierarchy. In France, ministers are helped by a personal cabinet of about 15 to 20 people who form an advisory staff working directly under the control of the secretary. This model is reflected in the European Commission, the main bureaucratic and executive body of the European Union, where the commissioners (equivalent to ministers) each have a cabinet of advisers, with rules designed to ensure a good mix from several EU countries. Where career bureaucrats know that they can outlast a particularly difficult secretary, personal advisers realize that their position depends on providing effective support to the current occupant.

Division: An operating unit of a department, responsible to the secretary (or minister) but often with considerable independence. Also known as *sections* or *bureaus*, or (confusingly) as *departments* in countries where the larger unit is a ministry.

Divisions

Government departments are usually split into **divisions** or sections, each responsible for a particular aspect of the department's work. Table 10.1 gives

Table 10.1: Divisions and agencies in the Australian Department of Home Affairs

Aviation and Maritime Security Division
Border Force
Centre to Counter Child Exploitation
Centre for Counter-Terrorism Coordination
Commonwealth Transnational Serious and Organized Crime Coordinator
Computer Emergency Response Team
Criminal Intelligence Commission
Cyber and Infrastructure Security Centre
Cyber Security Policy Division
Government Crisis Coordination Centre
Institute of Criminology
National Counter Foreign Interference Coordinator
National Emergency Management Agency
Security Intelligence Organization
Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre

Source: Australian Department of Home Affairs (2024).

the example of Australia's Department of Home Affairs, whose divisions cover everything from counter-terrorism to organized crime and crisis coordination. Divisions are the operating units of departments, the sections within which the work gets done. They are the workhorses of government, the store of its experience and, in practice, the places where many important decisions are reached.

The picture of a hierarchy is not always as clear as it seems, and it would be wrong to suppose that working practices correspond exactly to organizational charts. Rarely does information move smoothly up and down the administrative pyramid. For example, the many divisions within Germany's 15 federal ministries have a concentration of expertise that enables them to block, or at least circumvent, reforms proposed from the top. A monopoly of knowledge creates the potential to neutralize change. In most democracies, divisions within departments also have their own ethos derived from long experience with their subject area. This entrenched in-house view breeds a natural cynicism towards the latest political initiative, and helps to account for the frustration many newly appointed secretaries or ministers feel in steering their department in new directions.

Non-departmental public body: Operates at one or more removes from the government, providing management flexibility and political independence.

Non-departmental public bodies

Another type of public organization is the **non-departmental public body**. These operate at one remove from government departments, with a formal relationship of at least semi-independence. Throughout the democratic world, such bodies are growing in number, complicating not only the academic task

of mapping government, but also the practical job of ensuring that the government as a whole acts coherently.

These bodies include state-owned entities (such as postal services or health care services), agencies contracted to deliver government services, agencies providing advice to government, and agencies charged with regulating an aspect of social life in which the public interest is at stake. They occupy an ambivalent position, created and funded by the government, but – unlike divisions within a department – free from day-to-day secretarial or ministerial control. Once appointed by the government, their leaders and staff operate with a high degree of autonomy.

There are several explanations for their creation and continued existence:

- They operate more flexibly and less expensively than government departments.
- They might be created as a response to short-term pressures to address a problem.
- They allow departments to focus on wider policy.
- They are protected from political interference in their day-to-day operations.

Regulatory agency: An independent government body created to set and impose standards in a focused area of activity.

One type is a **regulatory agency**. This is a body set up to oversee the implementation of government regulations, in areas that include natural monopolies (such as water or energy supply), communications, elections, food standards, and environmental quality. Regulatory agencies are increasing in number in nearly all democracies, partly to balance risks which cannot be well judged by the private sector. For example, weighing the benefits of introducing a new drug against the danger of side-effects is a task for public-minded experts, rather than for profit-making drug companies. Britain has embraced regulatory agencies with enthusiasm; over 140 agencies, from the Food Standards Agency to Ofcom (the regulator of the communications industries) now provide a central device through which the state seeks to manage society.

The United States offers the most established system of independent regulatory agencies. The first such body created there was the Interstate Commerce Commission (1887–1995), which has since been joined by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), and a host of others. The idea behind these bodies is that they should operate in a technical and non-political fashion. Despite their power to make, implement, and settle disputes about regulations in their sector, commissioners do not report to the US president and can only be dismissed by the president for specific reasons set out in the law creating the agency.

The European Union has also been active on the regulatory front. Its rules include regulations that are applicable in all the member states and that typically set a technical standard or goal that member states are required to implement by a target date. Along the way, it has created an expansive body of specialized agencies that are charged with helping make or oversee policy in areas ranging from drugs and drug addiction to health and safety at work, new medicinal products,

trademarks, maritime and aviation safety, food safety, disease prevention, and electronic communication (see McCormick, 2020, chapter 15). In many cases – such as the registration of new chemicals – the EU has gone on to establish global standards and to compel regulatory change in its major trading partners.

HOW BUREAUCRATS ARE RECRUITED

Recruitment lies at the heart of the debate about bureaucracies; careful studies have been made of how bureaucrats are selected, and the kinds of people employed, with the results telling us much about the character of bureaucracies. There is overlap here with the differences reviewed in Chapter 9 between descriptive and collective representation in legislatures: should bureaucracies look like the populations whose interests they serve, or should we assume that they can equally serve all people regardless of who their gender, class or ethnicity, for example?

Unified recruitment: An approach based on recruitment to the civil service as a whole, not to a specific job within it, and in which administrative work is conceived as requiring intelligence and education, rather than technical knowledge.

The main difference is between **unified** and **departmental** recruitment; the former is based on recruitment to the bureaucracy as a whole, and the latter on recruitment to specific departments based on technical skills. Britain exemplifies the unified approach, where administration is seen as the art of judgement, born of intelligence, and matured by experience. Specialist knowledge is valuable, but a good administrator is expected to serve in a variety of departments and is considered more rounded for having done so.

One variation on the unified approach is to recruit to a *corps* (body) of civil servants, rather than to a specific job in a ministry. France is an example of this approach. It recruits civil servants through competitive examinations to such bodies as the Diplomatic Corps and the Finance Inspectorate. Although recruitment is to a specific *corps* with a specialized title, it is as much an enrolment into an elite within which more than one-third of *corps* members are working away from their home *corps* at any one time (Halpern et al., 2018).

Departmental recruitment: An approach based on recruiting people with technical backgrounds to a specific department or job.

In the departmental recruitment model, by contrast, recruiters look for specialist experts for individual departments; hence the finance department will employ economists and accountants, while the health department will employ staff with medical training. When staff leave, they often move to similar jobs in the private sector rather than to different departments in government. This approach is common in countries with a relatively weak state, such as the Netherlands, New Zealand, and the United States. In the Netherlands, for example, each department sets its own recruitment standards, usually requiring prior training and expertise in its own area. Once appointed, worker mobility is limited: staff who remain in public service typically stay in the same department for their entire career (Andeweg and Irwin, 2020). The notion of recruiting talented young graduates to an elite, unified civil service, or even to a *corps*, is weak or non-existent.

Affirmative action: Policies designed to overcome the legacy of past discrimination by emphasizing the recruitment of women, ethnic minorities, and other groups underrepresented in the bureaucracy.

One exception to the general rule of selection on merit is **affirmative action**, found in countries that have worked to address the dominating position in the higher levels of the bureaucracy of men from middle- or upper-class families with a background in public affairs. The goal here has been to make

the bureaucracy more representative of the wider population, particularly by gender, race, education, and economic background. In a logic related to the idea of descriptive representation in legislatures (see Chapter 8), there are various arguments in favour:

- Bureaucrats whose work involves direct contact with a specific group of people will perform better at the job if they themselves belong to that group.
- A public sector drawn from a range of backgrounds will encourage stability in divided societies.
- A diverse and representative bureaucracy will enhance the acceptability of decisions among the public at large.
- Employment of minorities in the public sector will ripple through the labour market, including private companies.

At least in democratic regimes, women today make up a larger percentage of the workforce in government than in the general labour force (see Figure 10.6). This has been the result not just of affirmative action but also of efforts by government to offer more flexible working conditions, paid parental leave, subsidized childcare, and other benefits that make it easier for women to work. The numbers, though, are due at least in part to the over-representation of women in secretarial, part-time, and social care positions, and they often remain under-represented at the higher managerial levels (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2023).

The place of women in the bureaucracy is both a cause and a reflection of the unequal place of women in government and politics more broadly (see *Using Theory 10*). It is a cause of the problem because the perspective of women is not heard as much as that of men, and because women's issues are not dealt with as actively as they should be. It reflects the problem because of the imbalance

Figure 10.6 Women in the bureaucracy and the labour force

Source: International Labour Organization, quoted in Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2023). Figures are for 2020.

USING THEORY 10

Feminism: The theory and advocacy of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes.

FEMINISM

Even just a quick glance through the Bibliography of this book will reveal that the study of government and politics (at least as far as English-language publishing is concerned) is still dominated by men. This is unfortunate, because we can never really understand any field of human endeavour without incorporating multiple perspectives, among the most important of which is feminism. Of course, there are plenty of men who are feminists, but this does not mean that their scholarship will fully incorporate the perspectives of women, or of scholars with different gender identities.

Feminist ideas about government and politics date back to the late nineteenth century, reflected initially in efforts to win the rights for women that they had been denied, including the right to vote. Although feminism advocates the equality of genders, its focus has since been on critiquing and addressing the kind of gendering of political institutions and processes discussed in Chapter 9. The aim is to end the subordination of women and provides for a more inclusive understanding and operation of government and politics. The feminist perspective includes an analysis of the degrees to which political institutions and processes are (not) fair, just, equitable, and representative. The questions it raises include not just the role of women in government but the extent to which institutions and processes incorporate feminist views and values.

There are multiple types of feminism, including its liberal, radical, Marxist, socialist, ecological, libertarian, postmodernist, western, and Third World forms. The goals of feminist political theory include understanding how the role of gender impacts our understanding of government and politics, building a feminist perspective into other theoretical approaches, and pursuing gender equality. In her review of feminist political theory, Bryson (2016) argues that 'western political theory has been almost entirely written by men', and that even today many male political theorists seem to see the interests and concerns of women 'as politically unimportant and theoretically uninteresting'. For their part, she continues, feminist political theorists ask why it is that 'in virtually all known societies men appear to have more power and privilege than women, and how this can be changed'. In other words, feminist political theory 'seeks to understand society in order to challenge and change it'.

A new development in thinking along these lines is *governance feminism*, so dubbed by Halley et al. (2018) as a way of describing 'every form in which feminists and feminist ideas exert a governing will within human affairs'. Feminism, they argue, has found its way into the institutions of governance, and has been successful in changing laws, institutions, and practices. This is reflected in the access of women to rights they were once denied: the right to vote and to have formally equal access to education and jobs, and the right of married women to enter into contracts, to acquire and manage property, and to be criminally and civilly responsible for their actions. Feminist theory offers a way of better understanding the causes and implications of these changes.

between men and women at the higher levels of the bureaucratic system. It is revealing that one popular textbook study of women and politics in the United States (Dolan et al., 2022), subtitled *Paths to Power and Political Influence*, has chapters on elections, campaigns, the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary, but makes only passing mention of the bureaucracy. It may be time to study bureaucracies more closely in terms of the degree to which they have encouraged (or failed to encourage) equality in access to power and equality in terms of meeting public needs.

BUREAUCRACIES IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

This chapter opened with the example of New Zealand, one of the most successful – and bureaucratically efficient – countries in the world. A contrast is offered by Kenya, a hybrid regime that has developed an unfortunate reputation for corruption and bureaucratic inefficiency, and that has earned it (see Figure 10.2) a governance effectiveness score of just 39. It is described by Hope (2017) as 'one of the most predatory states in Africa' and 'a brigand economy where corruption pervades all levels of society [and] paying bribes to the police and bureaucrats remains routine for ordinary Kenyans'. This analysis is backed up by GAN Integrity (2020), an online service providing national assessments of country risks, which notes the penetration of high levels of corruption in every sector of the economy, weaknesses in the judicial system, abuse of public office, and widespread tax evasion. Although the hallmarks of this corruption are well known, though, the causes are not fully understood, beyond the effects of poverty, a lack of political leadership, and ethnic divisions.

While bureaucracies in authoritarian regimes fulfil the same basic roles of advice and implementation as those found in democracies, these jobs are defined and applied differently (see Figure 10.7). In terms of advice, autocrats look to bureaucrats not to provide the best understanding of the problems facing society, and of how to address them, but seek only advice that will back up their efforts to exert their control and benefit the governing elite. In terms of implementation, the focus is less on achieving the best possible results than on how to

Role	*Features*
Controlling advice	Providing advice and information directed at strengthening control of leaders and governing elite.
Implementation	Implementing policy so as to advance interests of leaders and elite.
Information manipulation	Providing support to the messages sent by the ruling regime on public issues.
Protecting self-interest	Protecting the powers of bureaucrats in the face of any efforts aimed at administrative reform.

Figure 10.7 Bureaucracies in authoritarian regimes

advance the interests of the elite, even if it means inferior overall policy, and the kind of low perception of authoritarian bureaucracies reflected in the World-wide Governance Indicators discussed earlier in this chapter.

Figure 10.8 looks at those indicators as they apply to some of the most authoritarian regimes in the world. It is not too hard to understand why countries such as Equatorial Guinea, Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti, Somalia, and Yemen rank so low, and why they have done so poorly over the last 25 years. Most are failed or failing states that have been torn by war, civil strife, ethnic division, and/or natural disasters, or that suffer deep-rooted corruption and have failed to build effective systems of governance. For Yemen and Haiti, matters have become notably worse; Yemen has seen a collapse in government effectiveness in the wake of a civil war that broke out in 2014, while Haiti is still suffering the fallout from a catastrophic earthquake in 2010 that took an estimated 100,000–160,000 lives and destroyed infrastructure, and fed over the longer term into a collapse in governability. At the same time, other deeply authoritarian regimes were already performing relatively well in 1996, and their positions have only improved: China's score has risen from 43 to 76, Saudi Arabia's from 49 to 69, and Vietnam's from 33 to 62.

The case of Nigeria is a curiosity. It is one of the biggest and most dynamic countries in sub-Saharan Africa, independent since 1960 and with an economy based heavily on oil. Although it has had multiple military governments, one of the institutions that they always preserved while in power was the bureaucracy. Soldiers in political office need the knowledge and experience of bureaucrats to make sure that government keeps running, so the bureaucrats remain in office. During the second military era (1983–99), for example, the Armed Forces Ruling Council worked alongside a group of senior bureaucrats charged with making sure that military directives were implemented. Against this background, it might be expected that the bureaucracy – of all the country's institutions – would be

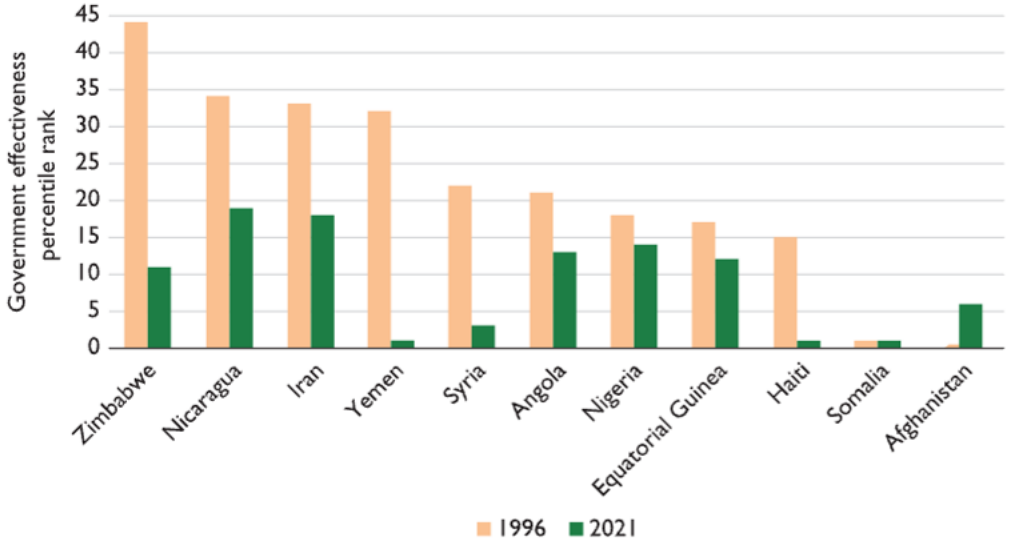

Figure 10.8 Changes in the effectiveness of government
Source: Based on data in World Bank (2024).

relatively efficient because of its longevity. In fact, Nigeria's government effectiveness has declined since 1996, thanks mainly to the blight of corruption built into the structure of society. (Nigeria ranked 145th out of the 180 countries listed in the 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2024)).

What this example illustrates is the difficulty of making distinctions between the place of bureaucracies in democratic and authoritarian regimes. In almost all the other chapters in this book, there are relatively clear differences: institutions and channels of representation – such as elections, competitive parties, and freely organized interest groups – are clearly weaker in authoritarian than in democratic regimes, because control and influence is top-down rather than bottom-up. When it comes to bureaucracies, however, the usual rules do not apply: while dictators can manipulate or even dispense with elections or legislatures, they – like their democratic counterparts – find it hard to govern without the officials needed to keep their countries running.

In fact, the story with bureaucracies in authoritarian regimes is not all bad, and much of the discussion about them has focused on how they can play a positive role in economic development even against a background of authoritarian government. In the 1950s and 1960s, for example, bureaucrats helped to encourage economic modernization in several countries in the Middle East and North Africa. In Latin America, this phenomenon prompted the coining of the term **bureaucratic authoritarianism** by the Argentinian political scientist Guillermo O'Donnell (1973) to describe the manner in which bureaucracies in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay ruthlessly pursued economic reform under a cover provided by repressive military leadership. A similar pattern was later repeated in the high-performing economies of Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia and Malaysia, where the effect was also to help pull them out of authoritarianism.

Bureaucratic authoritarianism: Regimes in which bureaucrats impose economic stability under the protection of a military government.

A newer and related concept is that of the **developmental state** (or hard state), first used by Johnson (1982) to describe Japan, and situations in which a country that was late to industrialize was pushed by active government intervention. The term has since been used more widely to describe countries where economic policy is guided and overseen by powerful bureaucratic elites; examples include flawed democracies such as India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, and authoritarian regimes such as China and Vietnam. Following the Japanese and South Korean model, most of these developmental states have seen rapid economic progress, and even, in some cases, democratization. Although the term comes out of international political economy (see Chapter 18), it sheds light on bureaucracies by showing how governments can be encouraged by their bureaucrats to use what might seem to be quasi-authoritarian means to push a country to a take-off level of economic development, generating further growth that might then induce pressures to democratize.

Developmental state: One in which the state intervenes heavily in the economy through regulation and planning, relying on an efficient bureaucracy.

China is a key example of this process. It is – to be clear – an authoritarian regime, but So (2015) argues that it has moved from a revolutionary state to a developmental state, following many of the steps taken earlier by several (now more democratic) Asian states. The autonomy of the Chinese state, he argues,

gives it the capacity to make and implement policy, to suppress dissent so as to make sure that foreign and domestic investors are not scared away, and to allow bureaucrats to play a key role in turning state-owned enterprises into profit-making concerns. All, though, is not well in China, which has particularly suffered – along with Russia – from the effects of what is called **crony capitalism**, a problem found not just in authoritarian regimes, but also in democracies such as the United States, Britain, and India.

Crony capitalism: Economic development based on a close relationship between government officials and business leaders, reflected in special tax breaks and favouritism in issuing contracts, permits, or grants.

Described by Pei (2016) as 'collusion among elites', the problem of crony capitalism in China helped spur President Xi Jinping into launching an anti-corruption drive in 2012 that resulted in numerous bureaucrats being sent to jail. This form of collusive corruption, argues Pei, is more destructive than individual corruption because it undermines the organizational fabric of the state, is more difficult to detect, produces greater financial rewards for its perpetrators, and undermines the ability of local government to provide public goods. In the worst cases, he continues, 'corruption networks, consisting of officials, businessmen, and gangsters, seize control of [local government] jurisdictions and turn them into local mafia states'.

Even though there are examples of bureaucracies instigating successful modernization in authoritarian regimes, there are also cases of bureaucracies that have inhibited, rather than encouraged, growth. One explanation for this lies in the concept of the **predatory state**, whose interest – in contrast to that of the developmental state – is in enriching governments and their supporting elites (including senior bureaucrats) rather than in building on the potential of the state. As a result, predatory states are more likely to hover on the edge of failure, as we can see in Burundi, the Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Somalia, and Sudan. All have achieved the dubious distinction of being failing states, authoritarian regimes, low-income economies, and states suffering from low levels of effective governance.

Predatory state: One in which the state works in the private interests of dominant groups such as bureaucrats, the military, or political leaders.

For Kalu et al. (2018), the main source of the problem of predatory states in postcolonial sub-Saharan Africa is colonialism. These states, they contend, 'inherited governance structures that were designed to support exploitation of the masses for the benefit of a few'. What happened after independence was that new leaders shaped themselves as 'big men' who ignored the rule of law and built on the exploitative institutions they inherited. These institutions – including bureaucracies – systematically learned to exploit citizens and resources for the benefit of the elites, encouraging failures in development, and the persistence of poverty.

The opportunities for corruption deepen and strengthen when a state is well-endowed in a profitable resource, such as oil or important minerals. (See discussion about the resource curse in Chapter 18.) A good illustration is offered by the case of Equatorial Guinea, where – as we saw in Chapter 5 – President Teodoro Obiang Nguema has governed since 1979. Equatorial Guinea is a small West African country, with a population of just 1.3 million people living in an area about the same as that of Albania or Haiti. Oil was discovered there in the 1990s, and initially fed into rapid economic growth, but that growth has not been sustained and Equatorial Guinea is today one of the poorest and most

Anadolu / Contributor

President Teodoro Obiang Nguema of Equatorial Guinea, whose corrupt government over a period of multiple decades exemplifies the character and effects of a predatory state.

corrupt countries in the world. Meanwhile, members of the ruling family and political elite have often accumulated considerable wealth, and the government often showcases new government buildings and highways as a sign of progress, while ordinary citizens live in poverty (Saadoun, 2019).

In many of these predatory states, authoritarian leaders have often used their control over public appointments as a political reward, undermining the delicate distinction between politics and administration. This cavalier approach has even extended to absorbing excess labour (especially among new university graduates) into the administration. Public sector expansion was often used as a method of buying support, or at least of preventing the emergence of opposition, with the result that public employment accounts for most non-agricultural employment in much of the region (Smith, 2013). Once appointed, public employees find that ties of kinship mean that they are duty-bound to use their privileged positions to reward their families and ethnic group, further overlooking the wider interest of citizens.

Under these circumstances, bureaucracies become bloated, over-politicized, and inefficient, acting as a drag on progress, and becoming incapable of acting as an effective instrument for development. With the main sources of national wealth (such as commodity exports) under state control, public employment becomes the highway to riches, creating a bureaucratic bourgeoisie. Only relatively recently, under pressure from international agencies, have attempts been made to rein in the public sector through an emphasis on building **administrative capacity** (Turner et al., 2015).

Administrative capacity: The ability of a bureaucracy to address social problems through effective management and implementation of public policy.

Moving away from the economic role of bureaucrats, and looking instead at their political role, there is another area in which the differences between democracies and authoritarian regimes are not always as great as might be expected: in both contexts, and in spite of the Weberian idea of specialization that discourages lateral moves, working in administration can sometimes be as much a path for recruitment to the political elite as experience in elective politics. We will see this in Chapter 16 with discussion about the close political relationship that often exists between interest groups, legislatures, and government ministries. Similar dynamics are sometimes found also in authoritarian regimes, where bureaucrats can use careers in state administration as a launch-pad for a career in business or politics.

Russia offers an example. There, notes Huskey (2010), thanks to the elimination of the Communist Party as the key path to influence or high office in government, and thanks to the efforts by the Putin administration to exert control, careers in the bureaucracy have overtaken those in business or politics as paths to influence and high office. Among the effects: those in senior political and administrative positions are unrepresentative of the social background of Russians as a whole, enhanced elite cohesion means less openness and political competition, and – lacking links to society – 'political elites are atomized actors in a vast bureaucracy where the only protection comes from membership in an informal network or, increasingly, loyalty to the president'.

The power of senior Russian bureaucrats has been deepened by the centralization of the federal Russian state under President Putin (see Chapter 11). Slider (2019) points out that the structure of the Russian bureaucracy has helped build the power of its senior members: instead of a single channel of authority reaching down from the centre to the parts, there are many dozens of channels, with federal ministries and agencies overseeing their own chains of command. This has resulted in a large growth in the number of federal employees working in Moscow as well as in the regions. In spite of proposals to decentralize, and thereby improve the efficiency of government and reduce opportunities for corruption, President Putin has opted for a centralized system, helping strengthen his control over Russia.

As with many of the other topics covered in other chapters in this book, there is plenty of room for research – particularly of a comparative nature – into bureaucracies and public administration in authoritarian regimes. They have similarities with their peers in democracies, but they are also more overtly used as a means of control and patronage, in a way that was once much more common in democracies. As a result, corruption and inefficiency are much more common in authoritarian bureaucracies, a problem that interferes with the ability of these regimes to govern more effectively and to meet the basic administrative needs of many of their citizens.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What images most immediately come to mind when you think of bureaucrats, and to what extent do you think those images reflect reality?
- Outsourcing: good idea or bad? Are there some services that cannot or should not be carried out by private contractors? If so, which ones and why?
- To what extent is e-government changing the personality of bureaucracy? Are the changes good or bad?
- Should senior bureaucrats be elected? What would be the implications of making such a change?
- Should more governments introduce the idea of allowing senior government ministers/secretaries to have political advisory staff?
- What accounts for the looseness of the correlation between bureaucratic efficiency in democracies and authoritarian systems?

KEY TERMS

- Administrative capacity
- Affirmative action
- Bureaucracy
- Bureaucratic authoritarianism
- Crony capitalism
- Department
- Departmental recruitment
- Developmental state
- Division
- E-government
- Feminism
- Meritocracy
- New public management
- Non-departmental public body
- Ombudsman
- Outsourcing
- Predatory state
- Public administration
- Red tape
- Regulatory agency
- Spoils system
- Unified recruitment
- Whistleblowing

FURTHER READING

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Peters, B. Guy (2018) *The Politics of Bureaucracy: An Introduction to Comparative Public Administration*, 7th edn (Routledge). A widely used comparative introduction to bureaucracy, including chapters on recruitment, budgets, and accountability.

Van der Meer, Frits M., Jos C. N. Raadschelders, and Theo A. J. Toonen (eds) (2015) *Comparative Civil Service Systems in the 21st Century*, 2nd edn (Palgrave). An edited collection that includes chapters on bureaucracies in western and eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa.

Van der Wal, Zeger (2017) *The 21st Century Public Manager* (Palgrave). Although written for aspiring and current public managers, this is a useful assessment of the world of bureaucracies.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Visit **bloomsbury.pub/comparative-government-and-politics-13e** to access additional materials to support teaching and learning.

SPOTLIGHT 10
JAPAN

PROFILE

Japan is a leading example of a state where modern ideals of democracy have been grafted onto a society with its own distinctive traditions. Notable for its long history of isolation (helped by its physical separation from the Asian continent), and for its reinvention following defeat in World War II, Japan's experience suggests that it is possible for a society to change without losing sight of its identity. The most obvious signs of its modernity can be found in its economic and technological development; it is the third largest economy in the world, and a major source of global capital and credit, as well as home to many of the world's major corporations. Its political system has, however, been compromised by traditional Japanese ideas about faction, obligation, and group identity, resulting in its recent downgrading in the Democracy Index from a full to a flawed democracy, and back again.

Form of government	Unitary parliamentary democracy with a ceremonial emperor. Date of state formation debatable, and most recent constitution adopted 1947.
Executive	Parliamentary. The head of government is the prime minister, who is head of the largest party or coalition, and governs in conjunction with a cabinet. The head of state is the emperor.
Legislature	Bicameral Diet: lower House of Representatives (465 members) elected for renewable four-year terms, and upper House of Councillors (242 members) elected for renewable six-year terms, which is less significant.
Judiciary	The 15-member Supreme Court possesses the power of judicial review but has proved unassertive. Unusually, the Court's justices are directly appointed by the cabinet, and subject to voter confirmation at the first general election that follows, and every ten years thereafter, with mandatory retirement at age 70.
Electoral system	Mixed member majoritarian system: 296 members of the lower house are elected using single member plurality, and 179 through party list proportional representation (PR). In the upper house, 146 elected using single non-transferable vote, and 96 through PR.
Parties	Dominant party. Multiple parties exist, but system long dominated by conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Democratic Party is more socially liberal, Innovation Party is nationalist, and there is still an active Communist Party.
Population	125 million
Gross Domestic Product	$,4,232 billion
Per capita GDP	$33,823
Democracy Index rating	Full Democracy
Freedom House rating	Free
Corruption score	73/100
Human Development Index rating	Very High

CASE STUDY: THE BUREAUCRACY IN JAPAN

Relative to their counterparts in most other democracies, Japanese bureaucrats are remarkably powerful. Their authority is born of exclusivity; in 2023, only 2,027 (or 14 per cent) of the nearly 14,400 people who took the civil service entrance exam passed (*Japan News*, 2023). Working in the bureaucracy is also a high-status career offering good benefits and the prospect of desirable post-retirement jobs in the private sector and local government.

Bloomberg / Contributor

Commuters in central Tokyo, home to the central government and bureaucracy of Japan. Japanese bureaucrats are notable for the demanding entrance exam they must pass and the long hours they must work.

The influence of Japanese bureaucrats is enhanced by the relative weakness of the legislature and of political parties, the high turnover of government ministers (because of the short life of most Japanese administrations – see Chapter 8), the close association between government departments and the elements of society they serve, and the ability of bureaucrats to issue ordinances that are designed to clarify the technical content of laws, but that often have the effect of changing the intent of laws (Hayes, 2017). Little wonder, then, that Miyamoto Masao, a civil servant in the Ministry of Health and Welfare, once quipped (with a hint of hyperbole) that 'power in Japan is held 90 per cent by bureaucrats and only 10 per cent by politicians' (cited in Beason and Patterson, 2004).

In the post-war decades of high growth, Japan provided the preeminent example of how a small, merit-based bureaucracy, operating largely on the basis of persuasion, could guide rapid economic development within a mainly market framework. But this has changed since the 1990s with a realization that bureaucrats can no longer offer the same strategic direction to industry in a global economy: the largest companies now operate on a world scale and some overseas corporations have become established in Japan. Even so, the Japanese bureaucracy remains powerful, professional, male-dominated, and small in number when compared to many other democracies.

Further reading

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11

Sub-national government

Contents

- Understanding sub-national government
- Unitary systems
- Federal systems
- Local government
- Sub-national government in authoritarian regimes

PREVIEW

The comparative study of government and politics tends to focus mostly on activities at the national level, but it can just as easily compare parallel activities at the regional and local levels. The functional equivalents of national executives, legislatures, and courts can all be found at these levels, particularly in federal systems, meaning that no study of government and politics in a given state can afford to ignore them. Many of the services that most immediately impact the lives of citizens come from regional and local government, and local officials are usually more accessible than their national counterparts. Despite this, turnout at local elections is lower than at national elections, and most voters tend to pay less attention to local than to national politics.

This chapter begins with a review of the horizontal and vertical interactions among different tiers of government. It then looks at the two most common models for national administration: unitary and federal. Unitary systems are found in the majority of countries, working best in those that are both smaller and more homogeneous. Federal systems are rarer, but they are found in most of the world's larger countries, accentuating their reach and global significance. The chapter then looks at the structures and functions of local government, touching particularly on the importance of urban government. It ends with a review of the dynamics of sub-national government in authoritarian regimes, where local government is often more important to citizens than the more distant and elitist national government.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Although the common unit of political comparison is the state, we should not ignore the importance of regional and local government.
- Most countries use a unitary form of government, in which regional and local units are subsidiary to national government.
- The strengthening of regional government has been an important trend within unitary states, building on the relationship between national and local government.
- Federal government – made up of two or more levels of government with independent powers – is most often found in larger or more diverse states.
- Local government is still the place where the citizen most often meets the state, and yet it is studied much less than it deserves.
- Sub-national government in authoritarian regimes has less formal power and independence than its democratic equivalent, but authoritarian rulers might rely on local leaders to sustain their grip on power.

UNDERSTANDING SUB-NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

One of the countries most seriously impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic was Brazil. It was governed at the time by the administration of President Jair Bolsonaro, a retired military officer who had entered office in January 2019 on a conservative populist platform similar to that of Donald Trump in the United States. Like Trump, Bolsonaro played down the seriousness of the pandemic (in spite of contracting Covid-19 himself in July 2020), claiming that it was no worse than influenza, refusing to institute a national lockdown, telling Brazilians to 'stop whining' as the number of deaths grew in early 2021, and bringing him into conflict with many of Brazil's governors and mayors.

Like most large countries, Brazil has a federal administrative system, and in the absence of support from the centre, many state governors announced plans to buy vaccines directly from manufacturers, while city mayors – notably those in Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro – instituted their own lockdowns. This example illustrates one of the effects of the kind of shared government found in federal systems. Policy in Brazil is made and implemented by the federal government, 26 state governments, the federal district of the capital of Brasilia, and nearly 6,000 municipalities. Federalism of this kind, as we will see later in the chapter, has the benefit of bringing government closer to the people, and is a practical way of governing a country as large as Brazil (the fifth largest in the world by area and the sixth largest by population). However, it also makes it more difficult to implement national policies, and in many ways compromised Brazil's response to Covid-19.

While national or central government (the terms are interchangeable) is concerned with the interests of entire states, and also with the relationships that exist among sovereign states, sub-national government focuses on government below the level of the state, which means an emphasis on domestic and local affairs. It involves different kinds of mid-level government (states, provinces, or regions within a country), as well as the kind of local government found in towns, cities, and rural areas; the latter come under a variety of names that include boroughs, communes, counties, districts, municipalities, parishes, and prefectures. The precise roles played by sub-national governments vary from one country to another, but they all involve a combination of political, legal, economic, and even sometimes cultural responsibilities – see Figure 11.1.

Every country arranges sub-national government in one of two ways: as either a **unitary system** or as a **federal system**. In the former, national government has sole sovereignty, meaning that sub-national government exists at the discretion of national government, with only as much power as is granted to it by the centre. In the latter, the national and sub-national levels of government have independent powers, although how these powers are divided and used varies from one country to another. The picture is further complicated by federal systems that function more like unitary systems (such as Russia), and unitary systems that function more like federal systems (such as Britain and Spain).

Unitary system: One in which sovereignty rests with the national government, and regional or local units have few independent powers.

Federal system: One in which sovereignty is shared between two or more levels of government, each with independent powers and responsibilities. Otherwise known as a federation.

Role	Features
Management	Managing regional and local affairs.
Implementation	Overseeing the implementation of national law and policy, as well as regional and local law and policy.
Information	Reporting back to national government on the status and needs of local communities.
Investment	Investing in regional and local economies, and in services such as education and transport.
Culture	Recognizing and protecting regional and local cultural identities.

Figure 11.1 Sub-national government in democratic regimes

About two dozen countries are constitutionally established as federations, but because they include almost all the world's largest countries (the most notable exception being China), they contain a large share of the world's population: about 41 per cent to be exact. Meanwhile, nearly 90 per cent of the member states of the United Nations are unitary, but because many of them are small, they are home to only 59 per cent of the world's population (or only 41 per cent if we exclude China) (calculation based on data in World Bank, 2024).

In unitary systems, government and politics tends to be focused at the national level. Lower tiers still matter, but the most substantial political issues are usually national in scope, and there is more of a sense among citizens that they are part of a national political community. National government also makes decisions that have national effects, which is why – for example – it was easier for countries such as Britain and Ireland to institute national lockdowns for Covid-19 than was the case in Brazil. In federal systems, by contrast, the sub-national units have more independence, their agendas can be more prominent, and they matter more in the political lives of citizens. Furthermore, because they have independent powers, states within federations have more leverage relative to national government than is the case with sub-national governments in unitary systems.

Although the common unit of analysis in comparative politics is the state, we should not ignore local government, which deals with matters that are close to our daily lives, including police and emergency services, public transport, land use planning, and public works such as road maintenance and waste removal. With more than half the population of the world now living in towns and cities (see later in this chapter), it is increasingly important to understand how urban government is structured, how it makes decisions, its role in national politics, and the preferences of urban voters. In authoritarian regimes, meanwhile, local politics is often more real and immediate to people than the decisions of distant urban elites.

Multi-level governance: An administrative system in which power is distributed and shared horizontally and vertically among different levels of government, from the supranational to the local, with considerable interaction among the parts.

While all states in the world are formally either federal or unitary, a third and related concept – **multi-level governance** (MLG) – has emerged in recent decades to help us explain the relationship between different levels of government

in democracies, prompted by the challenge of how to understand governance in the European Union (Marks, 1993). The term is defined by Niemann et al. (2019) as follows:

> an arrangement for making binding decisions that engages a multiplicity of politically independent but otherwise interdependent actors – private and public – at different levels of territorial aggregation in more-or-less continuous negotiation/deliberation/implementation, and that does not assign exclusive policy competence or assert a stable hierarchy of political authority to any of these levels.

Based on the argument that no single level of government acting alone can resolve most policy problems, MLG means that multiple levels must cooperate with one another. In other words, policymakers and interest groups in democracies find themselves discussing, persuading, and negotiating across multiple tiers in their efforts to deliver coherent policy in specific functional areas such as transport and education. The cooperation involved is not confined to officials working at the same or adjacent levels. Rather, international, national, regional, and local officials in a given sector will form their own policy networks, with interaction through all tiers. The use of the term *governance* instead of *government* emphasizes these relationships between institutions, rather than simply the organizations themselves. The dynamic is well illustrated in the case of the European Union, a unique arrangement in which there is cooperation and influence at every level from the international to the local, bringing in a wide range of governments and other interests (see Figure 11.2).

As with pluralism (see Chapter 16), multi-level governance recognizes that actors from a range of sectors – public, private, and voluntary – help to regulate society. In the field of education, for example, the central government departments will want to improve educational achievement in schools,

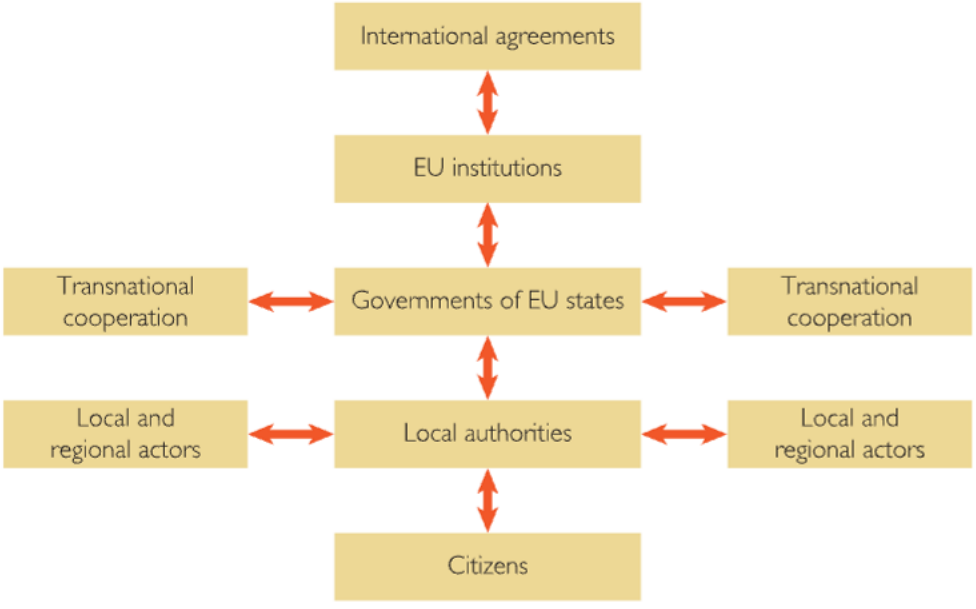


Figure 11.2 Multi-level governance in the European Union

Table 11.1: Four tiers of government

Level	*Features*	*Examples*
Supranational	Works above the level of states, bringing together two or more states with shared interests.	European Union.
National or central	Works at the level of a state, focusing on the interests of the state as a whole.	Any of the world's sovereign, quasi-, or *de facto* states.
Regional	Works at a middle level between states and local government.	States or provinces within federal systems, or regions within unitary states.
Local	Works at the level closest to citizens, focusing on local interests.	Districts, counties, cities, towns, departments, and communes.

but in order to achieve their targets they will need to work not only with lower tiers within the public sector (such as education authorities), but also with wider interests such as parent associations, teachers' unions, private sector suppliers, and educational researchers.

Understanding MLG requires an appreciation of the resources that the four main tiers of government bring to the table (see Table 11.1) and of how whole political systems work (see *Using Theory 11*). Typically, the national level has the most political visibility, large budgets, and strategic objectives, but officials from regional and local levels will have their own advantages: detailed knowledge of the problems faced by government and the ability to judge the quality of the remedies proposed. If lower tiers have both resources and enthusiasm, they can make a difference; if not, they may lose interest, limiting the ability of the centre to achieve its policy goals.

UNITARY SYSTEMS

Most of the world's states have a unitary form of administration, meaning that while they have multiple tiers of government, sovereignty lies ultimately with the national government. While regional and local governments can make and implement policy, they can only be active on matters that are not the preserve of national government. Reflecting this supremacy, the national legislature in many unitary states has only one chamber, since there is no need for a second chamber to balance national and sub-national interests.

Unitary systems have emerged naturally in societies with a history of rule by sovereign monarchs and emperors, such as Britain, France, and Japan. In such circumstances, authority radiates from an historic core located in the capital city. Unitary structures are also normal in smaller democracies, particularly those without strong ethnic or cultural divisions. In Latin America, all but four countries (Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Venezuela) are unitary, while all the countries of Eastern Europe have also chosen a unitary structure for their post-communist constitutions, viewing federalism as a spurious device through which Russia tried to hide its dominance of the Soviet Union.

In contrast to the complexities of federalism (discussed later in this chapter), a unitary structure may seem straightforward and efficient: there is one central

USING THEORY II

SYSTEMS THEORY

Systems theory: The study of the arrangement of – and the interactions among – the elements of a unit (such as a government or a country) as they relate to the whole.

In all the other *Using Theory* features in this book, the focus is on the theories most often used by political scientists to study government and politics comparatively. In this feature, the focus is on a theory (or a set of theories, since many political science theories come in multiple forms) that is little used in the search for understanding in politics, and surprisingly so given its potential. Systems theory – which has its origins in the natural sciences – is interested in studying the way in which the parts of a unit relate to the whole, which would seem to lend itself well to a study of how the parts of an institution fit together, or the interactions between the different levels of government that make up a state, or how the different institutions in a political system work together, or how different political systems interact.

The efforts to apply systems theory to understanding government and politics date back to the work of the Canadian-born political scientist David Easton, whose book *The Political System* (1953) looked at government as a system of demands (inputs) and of decisions and actions (outputs). Despite its apparent value to political science generally, and to comparative politics in particular, systems theory fell out of favour in the 1970s when it was criticized for having too little predictive power, and for being based too centrally on the American political model, whose features could not always be translated into understanding political systems in other parts of the world.

Systems theory continues to be used occasionally in the study of international relations: to help explain the structure of the international system, the multiple influences and forces that shape that system, and the reciprocal relationship between that system and its constituent states. It is more rarely used in comparative politics, though, despite the number of times in which the word *system* is used to describe government: for example, political system, parliamentary system, party system, and electoral system.

It is interesting to speculate why different theories are used (or not) in the study of government and politics. As we saw in *Using Theory I*, the problem lies in a combination of the sheer number of theories available to scholars of comparative politics, the faddishness to which theory often falls victim, the uncertainties that are often involved in studying the social sciences, and the dominance of Western thinking in political theory. To this list we could add a fifth challenge: how little we often still understand about the dynamics of many of the different elements of government and politics. Given all these circumstances, it is worth keeping an open mind on the potential of different theoretical approaches, which continues to change as our understanding changes.

government that holds all the important political and economic cards, lower levels doing only what they are allowed to do by the centre. However, the location of sovereignty is rarely an accurate guide to political realities, because unitary government is often decentralized. Indeed, there has been an effort in recent decades in many unitary states to push responsibility for more functions to lower levels, using one of three different channels.

Deconcentration: The process by which a central organization (such as government) transfers responsibilities to regional or local units within its jurisdiction.

The first (and weakest) of these is **deconcentration**, through which a central government redistributes functions from officials working in the national headquarters of a government department to staff working in its regional or local offices. This spreads the work around, can help bring jobs and new income to poorer parts of a country, reduces costs by allowing activities to move to less expensive areas, and frees central departments to focus on policymaking rather than execution. One example, from South Africa, is found in the efforts that have been made since the end of the apartheid era in the mid-1990s to move away from a state-centred approach to economic development, and to engage more citizens in the process through local decision-making. It has not worked, argues Khambule (2021), suggesting that more of an effort needs to be made to deconcentrate by improving the ability and capacity of local government to oversee development, and to improve coordination between the centre and the parts.

Delegation: The process by which central government responsibilities are shifted to semi-autonomous bodies accountable to central government.

The second and politically more significant means of decentralizing power is through **delegation**. This involves transferring or delegating powers from central government to semi-autonomous bodies that are accountable to central government without being wholly under its control. Examples of such bodies include those dealing with housing, transport, and regional development. Supporters see delegation as a means of bringing government closer to citizens, but critics argue that many policy problems are better dealt with in a unified fashion at the national level.

The Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Norway, and Sweden) offer the classic example of delegation, where local governments implement many of the welfare policies agreed at the national level. Sweden in particular has seen a wide range of tasks delegated by the national parliament (the Riksdag) to regional and local authorities. County councils focus on health care and aspects of transport and tourism, while municipalities administer education, city planning, rescue services, water and sewage, waste management, and civil defence. Together with transparency, accountability, and autonomy for civil servants, such extensive delegation forms part of what was once described as the 'Swedish model' (Levin, 2009).

Devolution: The process by which central government transfers some decision-making authority to localized, autonomous structures of governance.

The third and most far-reaching form of decentralization is **devolution**. This happens when the centre transfers decision-making autonomy (including some legislative powers) to lower levels. For example, where Spain was once tightly controlled from the centre, its regions were strengthened in the transition to democracy following the death of Francisco Franco in 1975, and devolution has continued ever since. The Basque region in the north of the country has substantial self-government, and Catalonia in the east was recognized as a distinct nationality in 2006. Devolution has reached the point where Spain

might legally be a unitary state, but in many ways looks and acts more like a federation.

In the United Kingdom, too, power is highly devolved (see Bailey and Budd, 2016). There is a national government and Parliament in London, and the UK is formally a unitary state, but Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales all have devolved regional parliaments. They could theoretically be abolished by a change of law in London, and problems in Northern Ireland led to the suspension of its regional assembly between 2002 and 2007, and the postponement of elections (something that could not normally happen in a federal system). (It was briefly suspended again in 2017–20.) However, the continued unity of the UK depends to a high degree on balancing government from London with that in the regions. The sensitivity of the situation in Scotland was emphasized by the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence. Although 55 per cent of voters rejected the idea, nearly 45 per cent were in favour, and polls since then have several times found opinion evenly split on the idea.

A key development in many unitary states has been the creation and expansion of a middle tier of **regional government**. (The term *regional* is used here to describe government below the level of the state, not – as also happens – cooperation among groups of states.) In a study of 42 mainly high-income countries between 1950 and 2006, Hooghe et al. (2010) found that 29 saw an increase in regional authority compared with only two showing a decline. The larger the country, the more powerful this middle tier tended to be. As a result of these developments,

Regional government: Middle-level government in unitary states that takes place below the national level and above the local level.

imageBROKER/Claudio Divizia

The Northern Ireland Assembly building on the outskirts of Belfast is an example of the kind of political devolution that can take place in a unitary political system such as the United Kingdom.

Table 11.2: Comparing regional government in unitary states

Tier	Number of units					
	France	Italy	UK	Poland	Sweden	China
Highest	16	20	4	16	–	33
Middle	96	103	35	380	20	2,862
Lowest	36,683	8,101	434	2,478	290	41,636

Source: European data based on Loughlin et al. (2011).

unitary states such as France, Italy, and Poland now have three levels of sub-national government (see Table 11.2), while China has gone even further, with five levels ranging from provinces to villages.

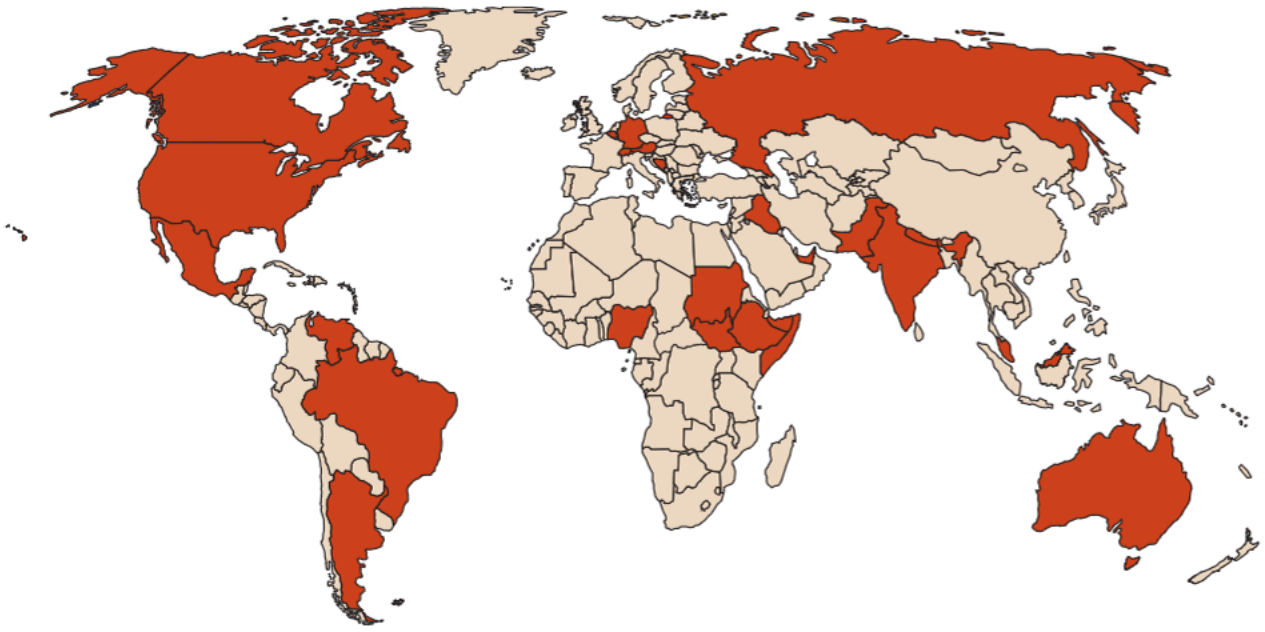
Many regions began as units created by the centre to draw attention to inequalities within a country and to encourage policies to reduce them. In most large unitary states, though, specific regional organizations were soon established, and became administrative vehicles through which the centre could decentralize. Regional bodies took responsibility for economic development and infrastructure, including transport. These bodies were not always directly elected, and were typically created by a push from the centre, rather than a pull from the regions. Despite this, regions have gone on to provide a valuable middle-level perspective below that of the state as a whole but above that of local areas. The amalgamation of local governments can achieve some of the same effects but often at greater political cost, given the importance of traditional communities to many inhabitants.

Regionalism has been encouraged in the European Union even as its member states have worked to cooperate in a wide range of policy areas; there is integration at the European level alongside greater recognition of local identities within the member states. A European Regional Development Fund invests directly in the regions, rather than through central governments, and the EU has a Committee of the Regions composed of sub-national authorities. Regional cooperation has been at the heart of the development of EU cohesion policies aimed at reducing economic and social differences among the member states, involving investments in poorer parts of the EU and the building of trans-European transport and energy supply networks (see McCann, 2015).

FEDERAL SYSTEMS

In contrast to unitary systems, where the central government dominates, authority in federal systems is shared among different levels of government with entrenched and independent powers (Palermo and Kössler, 2016). By definition there must be at least two such levels, but there are typically three: national, regional, and local. (The terminology can be confusing: the national or central government is usually known as the federal government, and the regional units are known variously as states, provinces, governorates (in Iraq), emirates (in the United Arab Emirates), or *Länder* (in Austria and Germany) (see Table 11.3). Federalism usually works best either in large or divided

Map 11.1 The world's federations



countries, and about two dozen countries meet the legal definition of a federation (see Map 11.1 and Table 11.3). Despite its size and diversity, China remains unitary because this allows for tighter control by the communist party (see later in this chapter).

The key point about a federal partnership is that neither the central nor the regional tier can impinge upon the constitutionally delineated powers of the other, and it is this protected position of regional governments – not the extent of their powers – that distinguishes federations from unitary states. Federations allocate specific functions to each tier, so that, for example, the centre usually takes care of external relations (defence, foreign affairs, trade, and immigration) as well as key domestic functions, such as the national currency. The regions, meanwhile, are usually in charge of education, local transport, housing, and law enforcement, and residual powers often lie with the regions, not the centre. This latter point is guaranteed in the United States, for example, by the tenth amendment to the constitution: 'The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people'. In nearly all federations, meanwhile, the states have a guaranteed voice in national policymaking through an upper chamber of the national legislature, in which each state normally has equal or nearly equal representation.

The motives behind the creation of federations tend to be more often negative than positive; fear of the consequences of remaining separate overcomes the natural desire to remain independent. Coming together helps exploit the economic and military bonus of size, especially in response to strong competitors. The 13 original American states, for example, joined together partly because they felt vulnerable in a predatory world. At the same time, American federalists also believed that a unified market would promote economic development (which it did).

Table 11.3: The world's federations

	Year established as a federation	Population (world ranking)	Area (world ranking)	Number of units in federation
India	1947	1	7	28 states, 8 union territories
United States	1789	3	4	50 states, 1 capital district
Pakistan	1947	5	33	4 provinces, 2 federal territories, 2 autonomous territories
Nigeria	1960	6	31	36 states, 1 Federal Capital Territory
Brazil	1891	7	5	26 states, 1 Federal District
Russia	1991	9	1	85 'subjects', including oblasts, republics, and three federal cities
Mexico	1810	10	13	31 states, 1 Federal District
Ethiopia	1952	12	27	10 states, two chartered cities
Germany	1949	19	62	16 *Länder* (states)
Sudan	1899	32	15	18 states
Canada	1867	37	2	10 provinces, 3 territories
Malaysia	1963	45	67	13 states, 3 federal territories
Australia	1901	56	6	6 states, 2 territories
Belgium	1993	80	137	3 regions
Switzerland	1848	100	132	26 cantons

Other federations

Argentina	Micronesia	South Sudan
Austria	Nepal	United Arab Emirates
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Palau	Venezuela
Iraq	St Kitts and Nevis	
Malaysia	Somalia	

Transitional or quasi-federations

Comoros	Spain
Democratic Republic of Congo	South Africa

Source: Extrapolated and updated from list in Watts (2008). The biggest federations are ranked in this table by population. Missing from the ten biggest countries in the world are China (ranked 2 by population), Indonesia (4), and Bangladesh (8), all of which are unitary.

Ethnic federalism: A federal system of government based on recognition of autonomy for different ethnic groups.

A more recent motivation has been **ethnic federalism**, as with the case of Belgium. First established in 1830, it has long experienced divisions between its French- and Dutch-speaking citizens, and finally became a federation in 1993, with three regions (see Map 11.2):

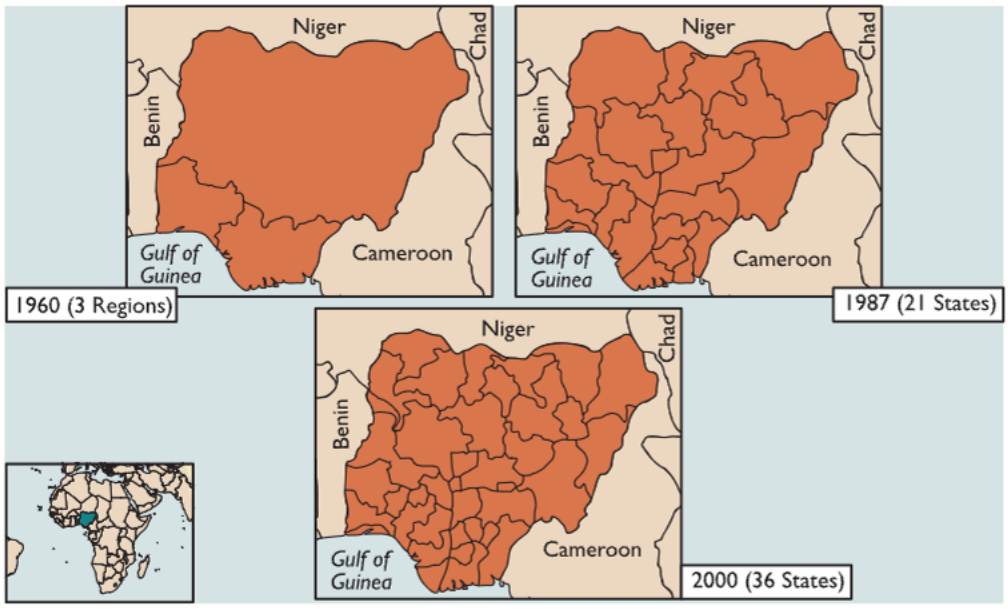
- Dutch-speaking Flanders in the north.
- Predominantly French-speaking Wallonia in the south, including a small German-speaking community in the east.
- The Brussels region, centred on the bilingual but mainly French-speaking capital.

Map 11.2 The regions of Belgium

Belgium continues to struggle, though, and has not been a particularly encouraging example of using federalism to address internal divisions. The main problem is that only two major national communities are involved, so the gains of one group are likely to be the losses of another. Federations are more effective when they cut across (rather than entrench) ethnic divisions, and when they marginalize (rather than reinforce) social divisions. Switzerland, for example, has had more success than Belgium, integrating 26 cantons, four languages (German, French, Italian, and Romansh), and two religions (Catholic and Protestant) into a stable federal framework (see *Exploring Problems 11*). By contrast, Nigeria has struggled to overcome its divisions with federalism. It became independent in 1960 with three regions, added a fourth in 1963, replaced them with 12 states in 1967, and has since cut the national cake into ever smaller pieces (see Map 11.3) in an effort to prevent the development of states based around particular ethnic groups. There are now 36 states and a federal capital territory, and yet regionalism, ethnic divisions, and religious divisions continue to handicap efforts to build a sense of Nigerian unity.

Just as there is no fixed template for a unitary system of government, so federations differ in terms of their internal dynamics, and in the advantages and disadvantages they bring to the communities that use them (see discussion in *Exploring Problems 11*). The baseline would be a neatly organized arrangement in which powers were uniformly and logically divided between the whole and the parts, but this never happens, and the internal relationship changes with time and place. It was usual in most federations during the twentieth century for national governments to steadily gain power, helped by the emergence of

Map 11.3 Changes in the borders of Nigerian states



national economies and the flow of wealth to the centre as tax revenues grew with the expansion of economies and workforces. Since the 1980s, however, the trends have become less clear-cut, leading to different ideas about the relative powers of central and regional governments.

Three concepts help us describe the differences. Where the separation of **dual federalism** provided the original inspiration for the United States, there has been a trend there – and in Germany and Austria – towards the contrasting idea of **cooperative federalism**. Where the US model was based on a contract in which the states joined together to form a national government with limited functions, federalism has increasingly rested on the idea of cooperation between levels, with a shared commitment to a united nation that binds the participants together. In Germany and Austria, though, the operating principle is **subsidiarity**. The national government offers overall leadership but implementation is left to the lower levels: a division, rather than a separation, of tasks.

Dual federalism: National and local levels of government have clearly separate sets of responsibilities.

Cooperative federalism: The layers are intermingled, and it is difficult always to see who has ultimate responsibility.

Subsidiarity: The principle that decisions should be taken at the lowest feasible level.

Since its inception in 1949, Germany has been based on interdependence, not independence. All the *Länder* (states) are expected to contribute to the success of the whole, and in return are entitled to respect from the centre. The federal government makes policy but the *Länder* implement it, a division of administrative labour expressed in the constitutional requirement (Article 83) that 'the *Länder* shall execute federal laws in their own right'. However, this cooperative ethos has come under pressure from a growing perception that decision-making has become cumbersome and opaque. Constitutional reforms in 2006 were

EXPLORING PROBLEMS II

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY OF ORGANIZING POLITICAL COMMUNITIES?

The focus of this chapter is the organization of political communities, with an emphasis on the two most common options: the unitary and federal approaches. The underlying assumption is that we should all live in states, and that states have the kind of legal authority that allows them to make a choice between organizing themselves as unitary or federal systems. As we saw in Chapter 3, though, humans have not always organized themselves into states, states have often had problems with their internal cohesion and stability, and some observers think that the power of states is on the decline. Perhaps there are other and better ways of organizing political communities, and perhaps it is time to think more creatively about alternative options.

One point of reference is offered by Switzerland, which is a federal state but has a looser and more devolved way of governing itself than any other country in the world. With a legal and political form dating back to the conclusion of a Federal Charter in 1291, but with a constitution that was not agreed until 1848, Switzerland – formally the Swiss Confederation – is a loose association of 26 cantons that were fully independent until 1848. There is a bicameral Federal Assembly, with one chamber representing the people and another representing the cantons, and executive power is vested in a seven-member Federal Council that acts collectively as the government, one of its members being appointed as president on a one-year rotation. Although the Federal Assembly is the legislative body, cantons have their own local governments, and multiple referendums are held every year in which Swiss voters are asked their opinions on key policy issues (see Chapter 14).

Another point of reference is offered by the European Union, which – as we have seen elsewhere in this chapter and in the book, and in *Spotlight 3* – is a unique arrangement in which 27 sovereign states have pooled authority and many of their resources, giving up a degree of their independence in the interests of combining their power and opening up the world's wealthiest marketplace. In contrast to the small size and devolved qualities of Switzerland, the European Union is a supranational level of governance that coexists with the national and the local in its member states.

- What do these two cases – and the examples quoted in this chapter of unitary and federal systems – tell us about the most desirable and efficient way of organizing political communities?
- Is there a 'one size fits all' approach, or does every situation deserve its own unique approach, combining centralization and devolution?
- Is there a case to be made for thinking of ourselves less in terms of the states of which we are citizens, and more as global citizens, and working harder to build effective global institutions that could be a form of world governance?

designed to establish clearer lines of responsibility between Berlin (the capital) and the *Länder*, giving the latter, for example, more autonomy in education and environmental protection. Although this represented a move away from cooperative federalism towards greater subsidiarity, consultation between *Länder* and the federal government remains embedded in German political practice.

It would also be helpful, for the sake of consistency and balance, if all the states within a federal union were similar in size, wealth, and influence, but historical circumstances have ensured that some have evolved to be bigger, wealthier, and more powerful than others:

- In India, Uttar Pradesh in the north is nearly 330 times bigger in terms of population than Sikkim in the east, while the economy of Maharashtra (of which Mumbai is the capital) is nearly 90 times bigger than that of Sikkim.
- The Brazilian state of São Paulo in the south is 65 times bigger in population than the state of Roraima in the north.
- In Mexico, more than 20 per cent of the population lives in and around Mexico City, which is also by far the wealthiest part of the country when measured by per capita gross domestic product.

The challenges of defining federalism have been deepened by developments in countries that are *de jure* federations but function as *de facto* unitary systems, and in others that are *de jure* unitary systems but function in some ways as **quasi-federations**. An example of the former is Malaysia, which was created out of multiple south-east Asian states colonized by Britain. Ranked in the Democracy Index as a flawed democracy, it is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world, and is formally a federation of 13 states and three territories. Yet the national government has much more control over local decisions than is normally the case in a federal system. Centralization has been encouraged by the dominance of the Barisan Nasional party coalition, which won ten straight election victories between 1974 and 2013. There was speculation (Wah, 2015) that the rise of opposition parties might lead to a more decentralized form of federalism, and Barison Nasional finally lost control for the first time in Malaysian history at the 2018 election (Ufen, 2021). The longer-term effects on Malaysian federalism remain to be seen.

Quasi-federation: A system of administration that is formally unitary but has some of the features of a federation.

South Africa is a case of a quasi-federation. When the Union of South Africa was created in 1910, it brought together four British colonies that had different and distinctive histories, and that might have followed the Australian and Canadian lead and formed a federation. It did not, though, and continued to have four provinces under a unitary system until 1994, when the map was redrawn to create nine provinces (see Map 11.4). Each has its own premier and cabinet, and the provinces are each represented in the upper chamber of Parliament (the National Council of Provinces) with ten delegates. The number is same regardless of population differences among the provinces, the party breakdown within each delegation reflecting party support in each provincial legislature. This might just as well be a federal system, but the long tradition of centralized control over the country continues.

Map 11.4 The provinces of South Africa

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

A former Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Tip O'Neill (1912–94), once observed that 'all politics is local'. By this he meant that the success of most politicians was closely tied to their capacity to understand and deal with local political issues, a reminder of the importance of **local government**. This is found in unitary and federal states alike, and in democratic and authoritarian regimes alike, because it is at the local level that the kind of political business that is closest to the needs and interests of most people takes place. The economic and security issues dealt with by national government are critical to all citizens, of course, but it is often more immediate needs such as good schools and safe streets that most people notice more clearly. Given its role in service delivery, local government should not be what it tends to be: the often-forgotten tier in comparative politics.

Local government: The lowest tier of government, taking place at a geographically contained local level, as in a county, town, or city.

At its best, local government exploits the virtues of limited scale. It can represent natural communities, remain accessible to its citizens, reinforce local identities, offer a practical education in politics, provide a recruiting ground to higher posts, serve as a first port of call for citizens, and distribute the kinds of resources that matter most immediately to people. Yet, local governments also have weaknesses: they are often too small to deliver services efficiently, are shaped by the relative wealth and poverty of local communities, lack enough funds to set their own priorities, and are easily dominated by local and national elites.

The balance struck between intimacy and efficiency varies over time. In the second half of the twentieth century, local governments were encouraged to become more efficient, leading to larger units. For example, the number

of Swedish municipalities fell from 2,500 in 1951 to 274 in 1974, and today stands at 290 (Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, 2024). Towards the end of the twentieth century, though, signs emerged of a rebirth of interest in citizen involvement, stimulated by the need to respond to declining turnout at local elections. By 1995, for example, Norway had resolved that 'no further amalgamations should be imposed against the wishes of a majority of residents in the municipalities concerned' (Rose, 2005), and it today has just over 400 municipalities serving a population of just under 5.5 million. This cycling between efficiency and concerns about participation suggested not only a real trade-off between the two, but also the difficulty of arriving at a stable balance between them.

In most democracies, local governments have two main tasks:

- To provide a range of local public services, including police and emergency services, land use planning, public transport, primary and secondary education, public libraries, parks and recreation, road maintenance, street cleaning, and waste management. The list varies from one country to another, and between unitary and federal systems.
- To implement national welfare policies.

This static description of functions fails to reveal how the role of local government has evolved in recent decades, particularly in those countries where large local governments carry out significant functions. One important trend, especially prominent in the English-speaking world and much of continental Europe (as we saw in the last chapter), has been for municipal authorities to reduce their direct provision of services by outsourcing to non-governmental organizations. In theory, most local government services can be outsourced, with potential gains in efficiency and service quality. In practice, though, these gains are not always achieved, raising the question of whether direct provision of services by local government is preferable to delivery by contractors.

There are two main ways of organizing local government (summarized in Table 11.4). The first and most traditional method is the *council system*, which is parliamentary in character, concentrating authority in a group of elected councillors. The council often operates through powerful committees covering the main local services, and in European examples (see Heinelt et al., 2018) there is a mayor – appointed either by the council or by central government – with relatively few powers.

One example of a council system is the network of *panchayats* (literally, 'assemblies of five') found in India and in neighbouring Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan. Traditionally consisting of groups of respected elders chosen by the village to settle disputes, India's *panchayats* have grown in significance (and have become more structured) as more administrative functions have been moved to the local level, and as the bigger *gram panchayats* (village councils) have been elected, each with a *sarpanch* (elected leader). There are now three levels of

Table 11.4: The structures of local government

Type	Description	Examples
Council system	Elected councillors form a council which operates through a smaller sub-group of functional committees. The unelected mayor is appointed by the council, or by central government.	Australia, Belgium, Egypt, England, India, Ireland, Netherlands, Scotland, South Africa, Sweden.
Mayor-council system	An elected mayor serves as chief executive. Councillors elected from local wards form a council with legislative and financial authority.	Brazil, Japan, Poland, some English cities, and about half the cities in the United States, including Chicago and New York.

panchayat: those based in individual villages (of which there are nearly 600,000 in India), those bringing together clusters of villages, and those covering districts within India's 28 states. Although their financial resources remain limited, *panchayats* are protected by the constitution and remain embedded in India's cultural attachment to the ideal of village self-governance.

The second method of organization is the *mayor-council system*. More presidential than parliamentary, it is based on a separation of powers between an

Hindustan Times / Contributor

Villagers gather at a *panchayat* in the northern Indian state of Haryana to call for better protection from local security services following communal clashes that had left several people dead.

elected mayor and an elected council: the mayor is chief executive, while the council has legislative and budget-approving powers. Used in Brazil, Japan, and many large American cities (such as Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York), this highly political format allows a range of urban interests to be represented within an elaborate governing framework. The mayor is usually elected at large (from the entire area), while councillors represent specific neighbourhoods.

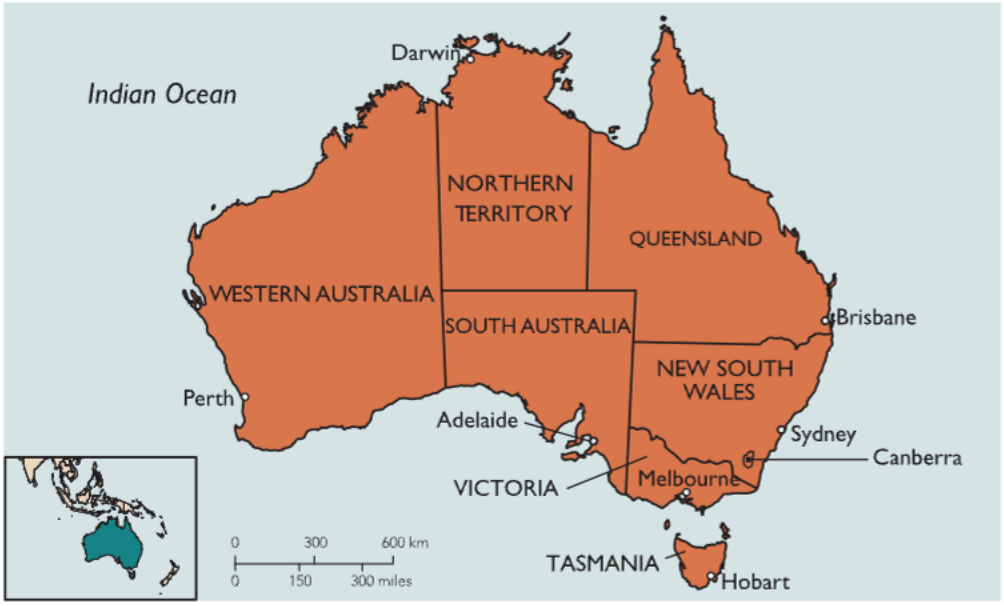
The powers given to the mayor and council vary. In the 'strong mayor' version (such as New York City), the mayor is the focus of authority and accountability, with the power to appoint and dismiss department heads without council approval. In the 'weak mayor' format (such as London), the council has both legislative and executive authority, keeping the mayor on a shorter leash. Whether strong or weak, an elected mayor does at least offer a public face for government in the area.

With most of the world's people (about 56 per cent) now living in towns or cities, the question of how urban government is best organized, and how it relates to national government, has become more important. Cities, argue Joshi-Ghani and Clark (2019), 'are now the defining organizational units of our time. Yet we have learned very little, beyond anecdote, about what effective city leadership is.' This matters deeply, they continue, because of the role that cities play in our hopes of reducing poverty, cutting carbon emissions, addressing social unrest, and advancing productivity. We cannot even agree on how best to treat the interdependence of cities and suburbs: the argument that they should be treated as single metropolitan areas – as city regions – has proved difficult to address given traditional boundaries.

To complicate our understanding, cities are more diverse than rural areas; their boundaries contain rich and poor, natives and immigrants, black and white, gay and straight, believers and atheists, and almost every other combination known to human society. We also have to appreciate that large cities differ from small cities, mature cities differ from new ones, those in emerging states differ from those in older states, and those in more urbanized states (such as France – see *Spotlight 11* at the end of this chapter) have more influence than those in less urbanized states. Some – known as global cities – have even become so politically and economically important that their connections with the outside world are sometimes at least as important as their connections with their home countries. Examples of these global cities include Dubai, London, New York, Paris, Shanghai, Singapore, and Tokyo.

Not all countries have made a success of metropolitan governance, as the case of Australia shows. It is a country of cities, with the five largest and fast-growing state capitals – Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, and Adelaide (see Map 11.5) – being home to nearly two-thirds of the Australian population of nearly 26 million. While most other countries with large cities have pursued a policy of decentralization, the same has not happened in Australia, where, due to the country's federal structure, the governments of states still have much

Map 11.5 The cities of Australia



authority for metropolitan governance. One of the results is that while cities such as Melbourne place high on rankings of the world's most liveable cities, it is mainly because their centres fare much better than their suburbs in terms of economic growth. Perhaps not surprisingly, calls for reform of city government in Australia are common (Tomlinson, 2018).

SUB-NATIONAL GOVERNMENT IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

Logic suggests that China – the second biggest country in the world by population, and the third biggest by land area – should be governed as a federation. It has 22 provinces, six of which (Guangdong, Shandong, Henan, Sichuan, Jiangsu, and Hebei) each contain more than 70 million people, making them bigger than most countries. Guangdong province alone, in southern China, has a population of nearly 105 million people, making it almost as big as the Philippines. China also has several of the largest cities in the world (including Shanghai, Beijing, and Chongqing), and more than 105 million of its people are members of often substantial ethnic minorities: the Zhuang people of southern China alone outnumber the populations of all but six of the 27 member states of the European Union.

Despite these astonishing numbers, China is firmly a unitary system, for the simple reason that quasi-imperial rule of the provinces from Beijing allows the

Chinese Communist Party to exert more control. There may be multiple levels of government in China (see Table 11.5), but all that really matters is the authority of the party, which adds to its control by circulating party leaders between national and provincial posts. Several provincial leaders serve on the party's central politburo, and most members of this key body have worked in top provincial posts at some point in their career.

Studying the relationship between centre and periphery in authoritarian regimes confirms the relative weakness of sub-national government, because authority flows mainly from the top down, and bottom-up institutions of representation are clearly subordinate. Little of the pluralistic policymaking suggested by the notion of multi-level governance takes place, and the more general description 'central-local relations' is a more accurate way of understanding political realities. For a mayor in such a situation, the main skill required is to lie low and avoid offending the real powerholders in national government.

It would be wrong, though, to dismiss local government in authoritarian regimes altogether. In fact, recent research in China suggests that the balance between the centre and the parts has changed in favour of the parts. A study a few years ago by Zhong (2015) showed that in the wake of more than a decade of administrative and economic reform, central government had become increasingly remote and less important for many localities, and that the centre's capacity to mobilize had weakened. Increasingly, central government policies were ignored, and local officials were often more interested in local or even personal projects than in centrally directed economic plans. This process of decentralization has allowed provinces in China to become laboratories for new policies, but also accentuates the inequalities among them, even leading to occasional expressions of concern about the possibility of the country disintegrating.

Table 11.5: Levels of government in China

Level	Number	Notes
National	1	National People's Congress is the supreme organ of state power, with deputies elected from the provinces and by the People's Liberation Army.
Provinces	34	Include 23 provinces, five autonomous regions, four municipalities (including Beijing), and the special administrative regions of Hong Kong and Macau. Include people's congresses, governors, and mayors.
Cities	323	Large and medium-sized cities. Include people's congresses and mayors.
Counties	2,851	Wide range of functions including economic regulation, market supervision, public service, environmental protection.
Townships	Nearly 33,000	Local people's congresses responsible for direct implementation of policies and laws decided by higher levels.

Source: Based on Yu (2019).

Across authoritarian regimes as a whole, there are several important roles played by sub-national government, summarized in Figure 11.3. The first of these is to function as a parallel government: when national power is exercised by a ruling party or a presidential monarchy, these bodies typically have a strong presence in the regions, where their authority overrides that of state officials, and where the ruling party works at the local level to remind everyone who is in charge. For ruling elites in the city, this local presence can be a useful way of keeping in touch with local interests.

The second role played by sub-national government in authoritarian regimes is to act as a channel for the kind of patronage discussed in Chapter 5, and the clientelism discussed in Chapter 13. Using local offices, the national ruler effectively buys the support of local bigwigs who, in turn, maintain their position by selectively distributing state resources to their own supporters. National rulers – just like medieval monarchs – often depend on provincial leaders to sustain their grip on power, resulting in central-local relations that tend to be more personal and less formalized than we would normally expect of a democracy. Particularly in smaller countries, the hold on power of regional leaders is not embedded in local institutions; instead, such rulers command their fiefdoms in a personal fashion, replicating the authoritarian pattern found at the national level.

In few parts of the world are patronage and clientelism quite so central to understanding political systems and societies as the Middle East. These habits have developed to the point where they have created what Ruiz de Elvira et al. (2019) describe as 'networks of dependency', or arrangements within which 'every affirmation or renegotiation of the respective relationship of the involved patrons, brokers, and clients, mutual obligations are acknowledged or reinterpreted'. It is clearly a two-way street of expectations: although daily bribes are regarded as annoying but inevitable, the efforts by some ruling elites to live in luxury and to keep power within their families are regarded as an affront.

Traditional ruler: One whose office pre-dates the introduction of modern systems of government, as in the case of rulers whose powers were replaced by those of colonial administrations in Asia or sub-Saharan Africa.

The third way in which sub-national government makes itself felt in authoritarian regimes is through the sustenance and exploitation of **traditional rulers**, whose importance sometimes reflects the weakness of imported modern institutions of sub-national government. Nigeria offers an example. There, as in many of its colonies, Britain strengthened the position of local rulers by governing

Role	*Features*
Parallel government	Providing a parallel to the dominance of national government by a ruling party or a presidential monarchy.
Channels of patronage	National leaders provide favours to local government in return for their support.
Sustaining traditional leadership	In many authoritarian regimes, and in poorer democracies, traditional leaders still have authority and sometimes wield national influence.

Figure 11.3 Sub-national government in authoritarian regimes

indirectly through them, with the long-term result that these traditional elites remain influential even today. One example is offered by Sokoto, a Nigerian state created in 1976 but with origins in an Islamic caliphate dating back centuries that was once one of the largest and most stable political institutions in Africa. It continues today to wield influence through the role of the Sultan as spiritual leader of Nigeria's estimated 90–100 million Muslims (Buba, 2018). The state of Sokoto may be led by a governor, but the influence of the sultan – Muhammadu Sa'adu Abubakar III since 2006 – is felt more widely. The effect is to allow traditional Islamic leadership to coexist with conventional sub-national government.

Baldwin (2016) opens her study of traditional chiefs in democratic Africa by recalling that when she travelled to Zambia as a graduate student to study the institutions that rural people used to gain access to state resources, she quickly found them to be missing altogether. Neither political parties nor government departments had much of a presence in rural villages, and she discovered that they were instead governed on a day-to-day basis by traditional leaders. Despite the efforts made in many newly independent African countries in the 1960s and 1970s to eliminate chiefs and to depose kings, many continued to survive, and Baldwin discovered that a 'whole hierarchy of traditional institutions existed in parallel with the formal state', and that these institutions were often actively cultivated and exploited by urban leaders. Clearly, the political role of traditional leaders deserves far more attention than it has so far received.

Looking at the bigger picture of how political communities are organized in authoritarian regimes, it might be logical to assume that because authoritarian leaders want to keep control, they would follow the Chinese model of governing through a unitary system of administration. Despite this, about half the world's federations are either hybrid or authoritarian regimes, including Ethiopia, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russia, Sudan, and Venezuela. These are more directed forms of federation, though, in which there is a high degree of centralized control over key political issues.

Consider the case of Russia, which is legally a federation, but one in which the parts have less independence from the centre than is usually the case with federalism. Although Russia saw a decentralization of power under Boris Yeltsin (President, 1991–99), Vladimir Putin subsequently oversaw a recentralization of power, his success based on several developments (Slider, 2019):

- Setting up an administrative system that allowed him to better monitor the work of regional executives without having to depend on the information those executives provided.
- Dividing Russia into seven new extra-constitutional federal *okrugs* (districts) to oversee lower-level units. Each *okrug* is overseen by a 'representative' of the president, whose priority is to make sure that regional law aligns with federal law. The representatives also ensure that branches of the federal government in the regions remain loyal to Moscow.
- Obliging all regional governors to give up their previous party affiliations, to join the ruling United Russia party, and to work to win majorities for United Russia in every regional assembly.

- Reducing – as we saw in Chapter 9 – the powers of the Federation Council, the upper chamber of the national legislature, by giving the president the authority to appoint its members.

Through these devices, Putin increased the capacity of the central state to govern the Russian people, so much so that Ross (2010) several years ago concluded that Russia had become 'a unitary state masquerading as a federation'. Certainly, Putin's reforms contributed to his project of creating what he termed a 'sovereign democracy' in Russia. What he meant by this was that instead of the uncertain pluralistic foundations of multi-level governance, priority was instead given to the interests of Russia, which included an effective central state capable of controlling its population. On that foundation, the Russian state works to strengthen its position in what Putin and his supporters see as a hostile international environment.

While Russia is a large and diverse country, perhaps best thought of as the product of an empire rather than of a more conventional process of state-building, Venezuela is a much smaller and more homogeneous country, that also happens to be both authoritarian and a federation. It opted for federalism upon independence in 1821, and remains federal today, even though it has a population of just 28 million people concentrated mainly in its coastal regions. Like Russia, though, Venezuela is federal mainly in name only. A combination of political instability, oil wealth, and populist military dictatorship has prevented devolution, and the federal government controls the lion's share of political power, including responsibility for elections, education, health, agriculture, and labour. Even where Venezuela's states have the authority to make their own laws, they must use federal laws as a framework (Brewer-Carías and Kleinheisterkamp, 2013).

Another authoritarian federal regime that experiences a gap between word and deed is Ethiopia. Notable for being Africa's oldest independent state, and one of the few African countries not to have been colonized (other than a brief military occupation by Mussolini's Italy in 1935–41), it was governed as a unitary system until 1994. Then, after years of turmoil and civil conflict, including a war that resulted in the independence of Eritrea (which had been annexed by Ethiopia in 1962), a new administrative system was created based on the concept of ethnic federalism discussed earlier in the chapter. Nine states were created based around ethnic groups, with a high degree of political autonomy, and even a constitutional right to secede if they wished. In practice, autonomy is limited thanks to a habit of control exerted between 1988 and 2019 by the ruling party (the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front) and its efforts to control inter-ethnic conflict. Ethiopia may be a state with origins dating back to the 1850s, but it is also home to more than 80 different ethnicities, and many of the smaller groups resent living in regions based around larger groups.

In some of the least stable authoritarian regimes, the formal institutions of sub-national government have been supplanted by opportunistic and/or informal control in the form of **warlords**. These are far from a new phenomenon, and in some ways are perhaps the oldest form of political domination in the world. Basing their control on military power, they are found sprinkled

Warlord: An informal leader who uses military force and patronage to control territory within weak states with unstable central governments.

throughout the history of Europe, China, Japan, and Mongolia, and have been a more recent phenomenon in several parts of the world, including Afghanistan, Colombia, Liberia, and Somalia. Many, argue Felbab-Brown et al. (2018), are the consequence of a breakdown in domestic government institutions, stepping into the resulting vacuum, perhaps developing popularity and support among local populations. They even sometimes develop their own enduring institutions, often undermining the legitimacy of the national state.

Field research on warlords is by definition dangerous, but our understanding of their motives and methods has improved thanks to their new prominence in several parts of the world. In one early study of their role in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Reno (1997) made the link between warlords and weak states with rich resources such as diamonds, cobalt, and timber. For Marten (2012), warlords are not state builders, like some of their feudal Asian and European predecessors, but instead rely on private militias to extract resources, enforce support, and threaten state officials. They thrive on their capacity to provide brutal political control in situations where the formal institutions of state have failed to develop or simply failed. In his study of warlords in Afghanistan, Malejacq (2019) argues that warlords exert authority through a process in which they use different forms of power to prevent the emergence of a strong and centralized state, while also offering durable and flexible forms of governance in unstable and violent environments.

There is clearly considerable unmet potential for research into sub-national and local government in authoritarian regimes, which tend to be overlooked because of the relative concentration of scholars on central government. We know that national executives in authoritarian regimes are strong, and that legislatures are relatively weak, but to underrate sub-national government – as is often the case – is to fail to do justice to the full dynamic of politics and government in authoritarian regimes. It also leaves us with an incomplete picture of how government and people relate to one another, an important omission given the often closer ties that exist between citizens and their local leaders than with their national leaders.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- In what circumstances is a unitary system a more appropriate form of government, and in what circumstances is a federal system more appropriate?
- Why is there is no exact template for a unitary or a federal system, and does it matter?
- Should all local governments replicate national governments and be headed by elected legislatures and executive mayors?
- What are the effects of the rising power of urban government?
- Why is local government studied so much less than national government?
- Does the experience of authoritarian regimes, where local government is often important, suggest that power in democracies has become too centralized?

KEY CONCEPTS

- Cooperative federalism
- Deconcentration
- Delegation
- Devolution
- Dual federalism
- Ethnic federalism
- Federal system
- Local government
- Multi-level governance
- Quasi-federation
- Regional government
- Subsidiarity
- Systems theory
- Traditional ruler
- Unitary system
- Warlord

FURTHER READING

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ONLINE RESOURCES

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SPOTLIGHT 11
FRANCE

PROFILE

France is an important European state facing the challenge of adapting its unique traditions to a more threatening world. The country has a reputation for exceptionalism based on the long-term impact of the French Revolution of 1789, which created a distinctive ethos within France. As with other states built on revolution – such as the United States – France can be considered an ideal as well as a country. However, where American ideals led to pluralism, the French state is still expected to take the lead in implementing the revolution's ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. As the country became more modern, urban, and industrial after 1945, so French uniqueness declined: retreat from empire left France as a middle-ranking power with a new base in the European Union, its society made more complex by immigration from North and West Africa, and its economy and governing elites challenged by globalization.

Form of government	Unitary semi-presidential republic. Date of state formation debatable, and most recent constitution (the Fifth Republic) adopted 1958.
Executive	Semi-presidential. A president directly elected for no more than two five-year terms, governing with a prime minister who leads a Council of Ministers accountable to the National Assembly. There is no vice-president.
Legislature	Bicameral Parliament: lower National Assembly (577 members) elected for renewable five-year terms, and upper Senate (348 members) indirectly elected through local governments for six-year terms.
Judiciary	French law is based on the Napoleonic Codes (1804–11). The Constitutional Council has grown in significance and has had the power of judicial review since 2008. It has nine members serving single nine-year terms, with three each appointed by the incumbent president, the National Assembly, and the Senate. As many as three former presidents of France may also serve on the Council, although few actually do.
Electoral system	A two-round system is used for both presidential and legislative elections, with a majority vote needed for victory on the first round.
Parties	Multi-party, with Socialists historically dominating on the left, backed by Greens, leftists, and radicals, while Republicans dominate on the right, and a new centrist party (founded as En Marche!, since renamed Renaissance) was the base for the victory of President Emmanuel Macron in 2017. The far-right National Rally has also been making gains.
Population	68 million
Gross Domestic Product	$2,780 billion
Per capita GDP	$40,886
Democracy Index rating	Full democracy
Freedom House rating	Free
Corruption score	71/100
Human Development Index rating	Very High

CASE STUDY: UNITARY GOVERNMENT IN FRANCE

Chesnot / Contributor

The mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, gives a press conference announcing the city's latest climate plan. Elected in 2014, and re-elected in 2020, Hidalgo is a socialist and the first woman to be elected mayor of Paris.

France has seen much reorganization of its sub-national government, leaving it today with three levels: 16 regions, 96 *départements*, and nearly 37,000 *communes* (municipalities). Adding to the complexity of the picture, it also has five overseas regions or counties (including French Guiana and Guadeloupe), and 'intercommunalities' that bring together *départements* and municipalities. Meanwhile, the three largest French cities – Paris, Lyon, and Marseille – are sub-divided into *arrondissements*.

France was once a highly centralized political system, with just two tiers of sub-national government: *départements* and *communes*. The network of *départements* was created by Napoleon early in the nineteenth century, and each is run by its own prefect and elected assembly. Napoleon called prefects 'emperors with small feet' but, in practice, prefects are now agents of *départements*, representing interests upwards as much as transmitting commands downwards. In 1972, the *départements* were grouped into 22 regions, each with their own elected councils, as well as regional economic and social committees that have an advisory role. The number of regions was reduced in 2016 to 16.

Meanwhile, the basic unit of government is the *commune*, governed by a mayor and a council based in the local city hall. *Communes* vary in size from a few dozen people to several tens of thousands, although most have populations of less than 1,500; a recent trend has been for the smallest *communes* to amalgamate with their neighbours. More pressures have been exerted on local government by the efforts of the French government to cut spending in order to control the national budget deficit. In spite of this, every *commune* has the same powers regardless of size.

France is an example of the phenomenon of the dual mandate, by which a politician can hold two or more offices at the same time. This is known in France as the *cumul des mandats* (accumulation of offices). Even after the rules were tightened in 1985 and 2000, the most popular *cumul* – combining the office of local mayor with membership of the National Assembly – is still allowed, reflecting the fused character of French public authority even in an era of decentralization.

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12

The media

CONTENTS

- Understanding the media
- Origins and evolution
- Comparing media freedom
- Social media and the post-truth world
- The media in authoritarian regimes

PREVIEW

Mass media lie at the heart of political discourse. They inform governments and citizens, help set the public agenda, define the limits of expression, and provide us with mental maps of the political world outside our direct experience. At the same time, though, they have recently undergone changes that have left us unclear about their changing role in government and politics. From a time when newspapers dominated political communication, we have moved through broadcasting (first radio and then television) to the age of the internet, with instant information from all over the world, in unparalleled quantities from numerous sources. Consumers now engage directly in defining what constitutes the news, but they are also subject more than ever to disinformation, changing the relationship between the governed and the government, and the nature of political debate.

This chapter begins with a survey of the political roles of the mass media, including a discussion about the key mechanisms of media influence. It then looks at the origins and evolution of mass media, and how their political role has changed, before looking at challenges to media freedom around the world, and the effects of the growing concentration of media ownership. This is followed by a discussion about the links between social media, disinformation, and the creation of a post-truth world. The chapter ends with an assessment of the place of the media in the government and politics of authoritarian regimes, and the ways in which authoritarian rulers limit independent journalism.

HIGHLIGHTS

- A free flow of political information provides a key test of the difference between democracies and authoritarian regimes.
- There are four main mechanisms of media impact (reinforcement, agenda-setting, framing, and priming), whose dynamics are changing thanks to the internet.
- Changes to the technology of mass media have accelerated in recent decades, with implications for the way news is shaped, delivered, received, and absorbed.
- Limits on media freedom are growing, even in democracies, where the concentration of media ownership has been a particular problem.
- The internet has made more political information more widely available, but it has also exacerbated the problems of the echo chamber, information manipulation, and disinformation.
- Studies find that the differences in the quality of political communication between democracies and authoritarian regimes are not as clear as they might at first seem.

UNDERSTANDING THE MEDIA

By almost any measure of freedom, Costa Rica stands out from most of its neighbours. Not far (in one direction) from the drug wars of Mexico and the violent crime of Honduras, and (in the other direction) from the political upheavals of Venezuela, this country of just over 5 million people ranks in the Democracy Index as a full democracy, and has a reputation for press freedom that places it above Britain, France, the United States, or Japan (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). That reputation is founded in a combination of the country's long and relatively peaceful history (the military ceded control to civilians in 1949), and strong constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression. Costa Rican journalists are protected by progressive laws on press freedom, and rarely face threats or other forms of intimidation.

The story, unfortunately, is not so positive in many other parts of the world, where media freedom is challenged even in democracies with a long record of open governance. The constraints are most obvious in places where journalists are attacked, imprisoned, or even murdered for their views, but less obvious – and perhaps more insidious – in countries where ownership of the media has come to be concentrated in the hands of a few large corporations, or where **disinformation** and **misinformation** have had a deeper and wider impact on public opinion and voter choices at elections.

Open **political communication** is a critical foundation for the creation and sustenance of democratic government. Without a continuous exchange of complete and accurate information, meaningful political participation would be impossible, government would know little about what citizens thought or needed, and citizens would know little about what government was doing (or not doing). The channels through which such communication takes place at the mass level is provided by the **mass media**. (The noun *media* is plural for *medium*, although – like many plurals – it has come to be used more often as a singular term, as it is here.) This consists of channels through which large numbers of people can be reached simultaneously, and include print media, radio, television, and the internet.

In democracies, the media plays a key role in encouraging the free flow of information and in helping keep governments accountable (see Figure 12.1). A democratic regime, argues Dahl (1998), must provide opportunities for what he calls enlightened understanding, with each member of a political community having 'equal and effective opportunities for learning about relevant alternative policies and their likely consequences'. In authoritarian regimes, by contrast, the control of media outlets is a tool through which leaders block the truth and maintain their ascendancy over potential challengers. Media channels are limited and manipulated, and citizens must often rely more on unofficial channels, including the rumour mill, for their political news.

The media is not just a source of information, but can also play complex and subtle roles in shaping what we think about, and how we think about the political news we see or hear. Whether we are receiving information directly from leaders and political parties, or indirectly via the media, that information

Disinformation: Misleading, false, or biased information that is spread with the deliberate goal of misleading.

Misinformation: False information that is provided regardless of intent to mislead.

Political communication: The means by which political information is produced and disseminated, and the effects that this has on the political process.

Mass media: Channels of communication – such as radio, television, and websites – that reach a large number of people.

Role	Features
Reporting	Covering the news, publicizing issues that need attention, and keeping people informed.
Watchdog	Holding elected officials and government departments publicly accountable.
Connections	Providing the glue that connects people in civil society.

Figure 12.1 The media in democratic regimes

is subject to value judgements and biases that create – according to Kaid et al. (1991) – at least three different 'realities':

- The *objective* reality of events as they actually occur.
- The *subjective* reality of events as they are perceived by governments and citizens.
- The *constructed* reality of events as they are covered and presented by the media.

Just how these realities are constructed and shaped has long been a matter of debate, with several suggestions about the different mechanisms of media impact (see Figure 12.2). In the 1950s, before television became pre-eminent, the reinforcement thesis – also known as the 'minimal effects model' – held sway (Klapper, 1960). The argument here was that people approached the media using a process of **self-selection**: they consumed information that supported their interests and outlook (a phenomenon known as selective exposure), interpreted information in a way that would make it consistent with their opinions (selective interpretation), and forgot or overlooked information that ran counter to their beliefs (selective recall). In short, the media had little capacity to influence their audiences, and its most significant impact mechanism was to reinforce existing dispositions, encouraging readers and listeners to stay loyal to the cause and to turn out on election day.

Self-selection: The choice of media sources made by an individual. For example, people who are already conservative will most likely choose conservative sources of news.

The reinforcement thesis has undergone a revival in recent years, as we can see in the polarized environment that exists in some segments of the American media. The typical viewer of Fox News or reader of the *Wall Street Journal* is

Mechanism	Features
Reinforcement	The media strengthen existing opinions.
Agenda-setting	The media influence what we think about.
Framing	The media decide how an event is narrated.
Priming	The media influence how we interpret events beyond those in a particular story.

Figure 12.2 Mechanisms of media impact

more likely to be a conservative drawn to these outlets than to be an ex-liberal converted to the right as a result of stumbling upon their news coverage. To some extent, at least, Fox News and the *Wall Street Journal* preach to the converted, as do MSNBC, CNN, and the *New York Times* for centrists and liberals. Reinforcement – as we will see later in this chapter – has also been at the heart of the effect of the internet and social media on political communication.

The second mechanism of media impact is agenda-setting, or the idea that the media influences what we think about, though not necessarily what we think. The compressed nature of news, especially on television, means that coverage is often highly selective. Reported events – particularly those covered by multiple outlets – will be more widely discussed by the public while non-reported events will have no visibility. It is still true, as once suggested by the American journalist Walter Lippman (1922), that the press 'is like a beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of the darkness and into vision'. In an election campaign, for example, the media will direct our attention to major candidates and to the race for victory. By contrast, fringe candidates and political parties will often appear secondary because they will receive less attention. In authoritarian regimes, opposition candidates will struggle to attract attention.

Because news programmes often focus on the exceptional, or sometimes – for light relief – the quirky, their content is invariably an unrepresentative record of events. Scandals, mistakes, and policy fiascos receive more attention than policy successes; corruption is dramatic but integrity is not; a fresh story will draw more coverage than a new development of a tired theme. The familiar is also preferable to the unfamiliar, which means that we will hear much more news from those parts of the world in which editors think we are interested. As a result, agenda-setting creates a selective and unbalanced image of the world.

The third mechanism of media impact is the framing of a story, or the way in which reports construct a narrative about an event. By focusing on particular aspects of a problem – including its origins, remedies, and evaluation – the media encourages viewers and readers to interpret the topic in a similar way. This is a more recent attempt to understand media impact, and a prime example of the interpretive approach to understanding politics, reflecting Plato's observation that 'those who tell the stories also rule society'. The journalist's words, the camera's images, and the internet headlines help to frame the story, providing a narrative which encourages a particular reaction from the viewer.

Consider the following examples of framing at work. Is homelessness presented as a social, economic, or mental health problem? How many examples of drought, flash floods, and wildfires are reported in the context of climate change? Does the media in particular European countries portray membership of the European Union critically or positively? Was the Israeli-Hamas war that broke out in 2023 mainly about Israel protecting itself or about ordinary Palestinians suffering collateral damage? As the concept of a 'story' suggests, the journalist must translate the event covered into an organized narrative which connects with the receiver.

Finally, the media may have a priming effect, encouraging people to apply the criteria implicit in coverage of one topic to that of other topics. For example, a study of the link between terrorist attacks and support for immigration in Western Europe (Solheim, 2021) found that while it typically has a negative effect, as might be expected, this is not always the case. The study used opinion polls taken during the January 2015 attacks on the Hypercacher supermarket and the offices of the *Charlie Hebdo* satirical newspaper in Paris (in which 16 people died), and found that differences in the way the attacks were covered had a more negative priming effect on immigration policy preferences outside France than within France.

While these effects co-exist, and are quantifiable in the sense that they can be measured, there are also a range of more general competing theories about the impact of the media on government and politics (see *Using Theory 12*). These have changed as the technology of media has changed, and also as research has provided new insights into the changes brought by digital media and globalization. Many of the old and mainly Western theories of media effects have had to be reviewed as more is understood about how these effects work in a cross-cultural and international context.

ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

In 1776, the English reaction to the American Declaration of Independence took 50 days to filter back to the United States. By 1991, global viewers were watching broadcasts of Operation Desert Storm (the US-led invasion of Iraqi-occupied Kuwait) in real time. Today, most of us take for granted the immediate availability of news from around the world, with an enormous variety of sources available to us quite literally at the push of a few buttons on our smartphones or laptops, or a spoken request to our smart speakers, and updates on developing stories being posted by the minute.

In the last generation, the media has become more globalized, fragmented, and interactive (McNair, 2018), and while we understand some of the effects of these changes, the others are still evolving, and much that we once thought of as fairly predictable has become volatile and unpredictable. Most worryingly, while the news has always been exploited and distorted to political ends, the extent of that distortion has widened, and the means used to change the message have become more sophisticated. The most recent development in that sense has been the use of artificial intelligence to manipulate and create news.

Although the changes are now coming thick and fast, the rise of the mass media has been a relatively recent development, dating back no more than two centuries (see Table 12.1). The Gutenberg press started printing with moveable type in 1453, and the first newspaper appeared (in what is now Germany) in 1605, but most of what we consider mass media came with developments in technology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, allowing communication at the mass level. This meant a shared experience for dispersed populations, providing a glue to connect the citizens of states and other large political units.

USING THEORY 12

MEDIA THEORIES

Just as there are competing arguments about the impact of the media on the construction and shaping of political realities, so there are competing theories about how best to understand the relationship between media and politics more generally. One way of looking at media theories, and comparing their arguments, is to place them in chronological order (see Ward, 2015).

- The earliest view of the press was the *authoritarian theory* that – in the West, at least – once explained the attitudes of monarchs, the military, church officials, and other elite groups. The goal of the press, in this view, was to enhance the power of the ruler, an idea that evolved during the twentieth century into totalitarian and communist ideas about the press as a vehicle for propaganda. It has since evolved into the view in authoritarian regimes that the media exists to serve the state, not the people.
- The free press or *libertarian theory* emerged in the eighteenth century with claims that newspapers spoke for the people, and that there should be freedom of public expression. It evolved into the view that all media should be free to operate in an open marketplace of ideas, without interference by the government. In reality, this was no more than an ideal, because governments intervened – and continue to intervene – when they feel that security or stability are threatened, or when social interests come into conflict.
- During the twentieth century, *social responsibility theory* emerged, emphasizing the accountability of the media to society. While they are free, the media should also serve the public good by providing reliable and comprehensive news, and acting as a forum for diverse values and opinions.
- Since then, new theoretical views about the media have evolved, including *development theory* (media freedom is important, but less so than the demands of political, economic, and social development), and *alternative media theory* (those media are best that are closest to grassroots society, and that are small-scale, non-commercial, and participatory).

In practice, most countries can be studied and compared using a combination of these theoretical approaches, reflecting the variety of media types and the variety of roles that different media play in the lives of citizens.

First came the emergence during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of mass-circulation newspapers, encouraged by widespread literacy in shared languages. The primacy of newspapers was supplanted in the twentieth century by broadcasting: cinema newsreels, radio, and then television enabled communication with the mass public to take place in a spoken and personal form rather than a written and more abstract form, and the news was increasingly live rather than hours or days old. Communication also went international, beginning slowly in the 1920s with the development of shortwave radio,

Table 12.1: The evolution of mass media

Date	Changes and effects
Late 1800s/early 1900s	Popular newspapers emerge, often with mass circulation.
1930s	Radio greatly cuts the amount of time it takes for news to spread, and allows politicians for the first time to broadcast directly into the homes of voters.
1950s–1960s	Television becomes the most popular mass medium, but there were few channels at first, and most of the news was local.
1970s–1980s	TV audiences begin to fragment with an increase in the number of channels, distribution by cable and satellite, and the use of video.
1990s	International communication broadens with the rise of the internet, mobile phone use, and 24-hour global television news.
2000s	Mobile phones begin to replace landlines, and access expands to low-income countries. Sharp decline in readership of printed newspapers.
2010s	Continued expansion of social media, extending horizontal communication among citizens. The internet typically accessed via smartphones, and structured television choices increasingly replaced by streaming.
2020s	Smartphones, smart speakers, and laptops are preferred devices for most people in wealthier communities, digital video catches up with broadcast television, print media continues to decline, artificial intelligence is used more frequently (Kerwin, 2022).

first used by Britain and the Netherlands to broadcast to their empires, and then by Nazi Germany, the United States, the Soviet Union, and other major Western states.

The impact of broadcasting was at first relatively benign, with a small number of national radio and television channels dominating the airwaves after World War II, providing a shared experience of national events and popular entertainment. More dramatic was the impact of broadcasting on politicians themselves. While a public speech to a live audience encouraged expansive words and dramatic gestures, a more restrained tone was needed for transmission from the broadcasting studio direct to the living room. The art was to talk to the millions as though they were individuals, an approach exemplified by President Franklin Roosevelt's 'fireside chats', broadcast live by radio to the American population in the 1930s. The impact of his folksy idiom was undeniable, and he talked less *to* the citizens than *as* a citizen, thereby earning political trust. In this way, broadcasting – and radio, specifically – transformed not only the reach, but also the style, of political communication.

This was even more true of television when it began to take off in the 1950s, obliging candidates and leaders to think not just about what they were saying, but also about how they looked while they were saying it. This was first brought home forcefully with the televised Nixon–Kennedy debates during the 1960 presidential election in the United States. Although there were four debates, it was the first of them that attracted the most analysis. Kennedy appeared healthy and relaxed, while Nixon appeared nervous and unwell, and while a majority of those who watched the debate on television felt that Kennedy had performed

best, a majority of those who listened on radio thought that Nixon had performed best. Television now moved to the centre of political campaigning, with enormous care taken over how candidates and leaders presented themselves.

Broadcasting also made a substantial contribution to political communication in low-income countries, thanks to its two major advantages over print media: it does not require physical distribution to users, and it is accessible to people who cannot read. These factors came into play with the spread of radio and then of satellite television, as distant villagers were able to gather around a shared set to hear or watch the latest news. In many emerging countries there was only one state-owned channel each for radio and television, and the opening item on the news typically focused on the activities of national leaders, no matter how trivial those activities were.

The globalization of political communication was exemplified by the later rise of global 24-hour television news. This began with the creation of national all-news stations such as CNN, which began broadcasting in the United States in 1980. It was followed by CNN International in 1985, and then by BBC World (1991), Deutsche Welle from Germany (1992), Al-Jazeera from Qatar (1996), NHK World from Japan (1998), RT from Russia (2005), and France 24 (2006). These stations have not always been profitable, and they reach only those audiences that have access to cable, satellite, or the internet, but global television broadens the options for sources of political information and also encourages a more global view of political issues.

TENGKU BAHAR / Staff

The rise of 24-hour global television is exemplified by the story of Al-Jazeera, headquartered in Qatar but whose programming is available all over the world, and which has offices and journalists in multiple countries.

Internet: The global system of computer networks, connected through standardized communication protocols, carrying services such as the World Wide Web and email.

Social media: Interactive online platforms which facilitate collective or individual access to the exchange of user-generated content.

All of these changes, which had happened in just a matter of decades, were overwhelmed in the 1990s with the birth and growth of digital technology. This has had the effect of throwing multiple rocks into the pond of political communication: it has created ripples and disturbances that often make it difficult to see into the reaches of the pond in order to establish the effects. This has all happened in a remarkably short period of time: the first commercial **internet** providers date back only to the 1980s, the World Wide Web was created in 1989, Google was founded in 1998, Wi-Fi emerged a year later, and most of the sites, habits, and expectations that we now associate with **social media** are barely into their second decade of existence (see Table 12.2).

Although most of us now live in a social media world, it is important to appreciate that access to the internet is far from equal. Between 2005 and 2022, internet use grew from 16 per cent to 66 per cent of the world's population, but while rates of connection were as high as 89 per cent in Europe and 83 per cent in the Americas, only 64 per cent of people were connected in Asia and the Pacific, and 40 per cent in Africa (see Chapter 13 for more details). For many of those who are unconnected, it is a problem of lacking access to electricity and/or computers and/or smartphones and/or broadband services, while others live in authoritarian regimes that limit and censor the internet, and there are many people who do not use the internet for news or use it only in a selective manner.

There are also important differences in internet access *within* communities and countries: younger people are more connected to the internet than older people, for example, hinting at generational changes yet to come, while there is a notable urban–rural divide (see Figure 12.3) that accentuates the dominant role of towns and cities discussed in the last chapter. It might also be suggested that the Western dominance of the internet has created a new form of information imperialism, although the balance has been changing with the rise of Chinese equivalents (Jin, 2015). These include Baidu (a search engine), Weibo (equivalent to X), Taobao (an online market), and Youku (equivalent to YouTube).

One of the more dramatic effects of the rise of social media has been the advent of interactivity in the provision of news. Radio phone-ins were the first

Table 12.2: Forms of social media

Type	Features	Examples
Social networking	Allows people to connect with one another, to upload media, and to share information and ideas.	Facebook (created 2004), YouTube (created 2005), Google+, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Reddit, Snapchat, TikTok, and VK (Russia).
Collaborative sites	Allows users to post content.	Wikipedia (created 2001), Quora.
Blogs and microblogs	Allows users to share ideas and hold online conversations on matters of shared interest.	X (created 2006 as Twitter), Tumblr, and Weibo (China).

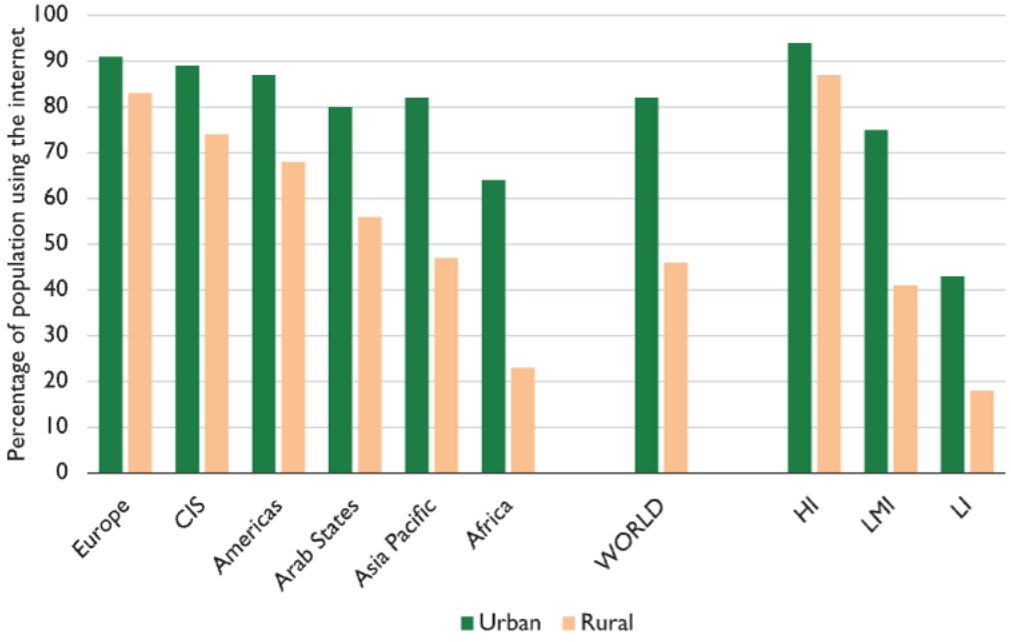


Figure 12.3 Internet use: the urban–rural divide

Source: Based on International Telecommunication Union (2023). CIS = Commonwealth of Independent States (former USSR), HI = high-income countries, LMI = lower-middle-income countries, LI = low-income countries.

to allow ordinary people to listen to their peers discussing current issues; social media performs the same function in cyberspace, and to much bigger and wider audiences. Messaging systems and social media allow peer-to-peer interchanges which tend to crowd out top-down communication from politicians to voters. A new generation that has known little but interactive media is raising an important question to which politicians have yet to find an adequate answer: why should we listen to you when we have the option of interacting electronically with others who share our interests?

The political implications of these changes are substantial. Where earlier generations would passively read, watch, or listen to whatever news they received (much of which was no longer new), digital news is user-driven and constantly updated. In response, political leaders and parties are using a greater range and sophistication of marketing strategies, including the use of personalized but expensive contact techniques via email, texts, and social media. In this more fragmented media environment, politicians must compete for followers on Facebook, Instagram, and X with sports personalities, movie stars, and reality TV shows. The sound bite, never unimportant, has become even more vital as politicians learn to articulate their agenda in a short interview, or an even briefer tweet.

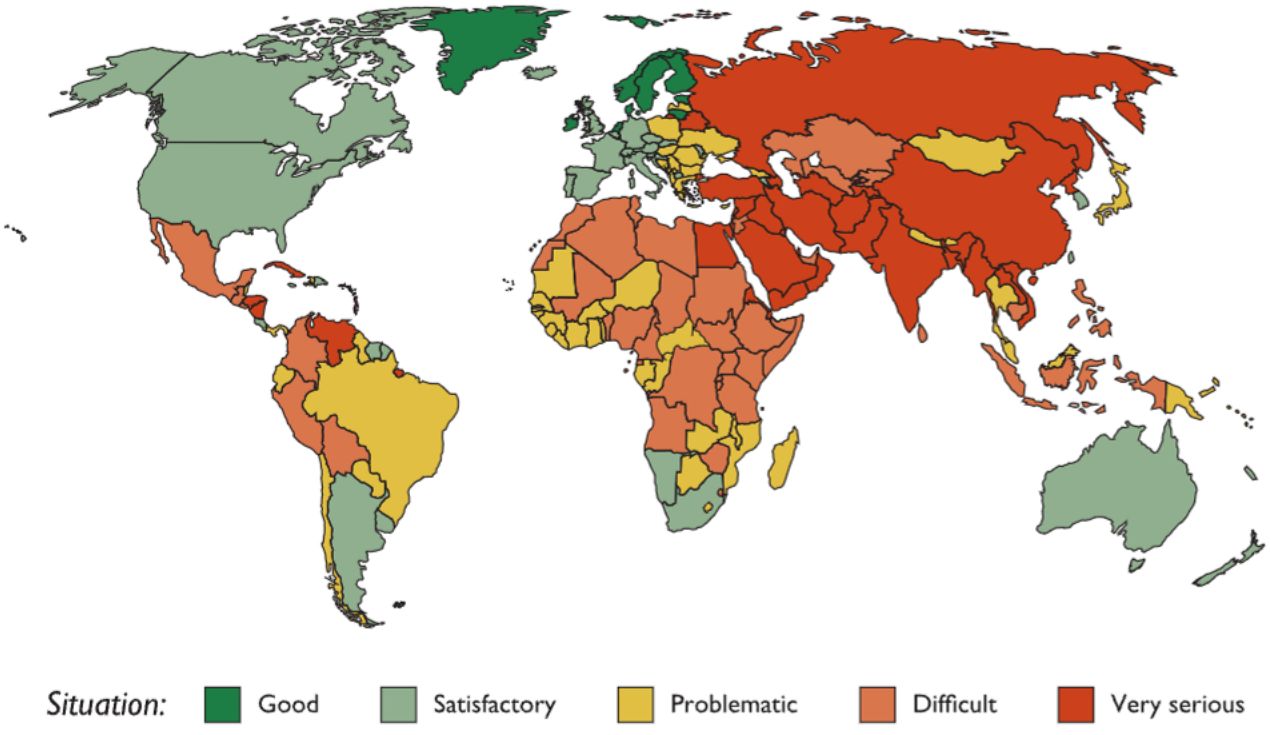
If it was only well-meaning humans who were determining the pace and the quality of the interaction, then we could see these changes as a healthy development in the marketplace of ideas. Unfortunately, many who mean harm are also involved in this interactivity, and – as we will see later in this chapter – the definition of 'news' has increasingly been influenced by those seeking to mislead, and has been defined more narrowly than before.

COMPARING MEDIA FREEDOM

While we may have the impression today of a remarkable array of different media outlets to help us keep up with the news – cell phones, for example, give their owners immediate access to websites from around the world, while smart speakers allow their owners to listen live to radio stations from all over the world – all is not as it seems. As Map 12.1 shows, free and independent media are a rare commodity, mainly found only in the world's strongest democracies, and relatively unusual in most of Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. The map is based on data generated by Reporters Without Borders, a Paris-based non-government organization which monitors international press freedom, and uses a panel of academic and media experts to produce an annual World Press Freedom Index. It defines press freedom as 'the ability of journalists as individuals and collectives to select, produce, and disseminate news in the public interest independent of political, economic, legal, and social interference and in the absence of threats to their physical and mental safety'.

Its 2023 index found 'enormous volatility' in the state of the world's media. This was the result, it concluded, of 'increased aggressiveness on the part of the authorities in many countries and growing animosity towards journalists on social media and in the physical world', as well as a consequence of 'growth in the fake content industry, which produces and distributes disinformation and provides the tools for manufacturing it' (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). It

Map 12.1 Media freedom around the world



Source: Based on Reporters Without Borders (2023).

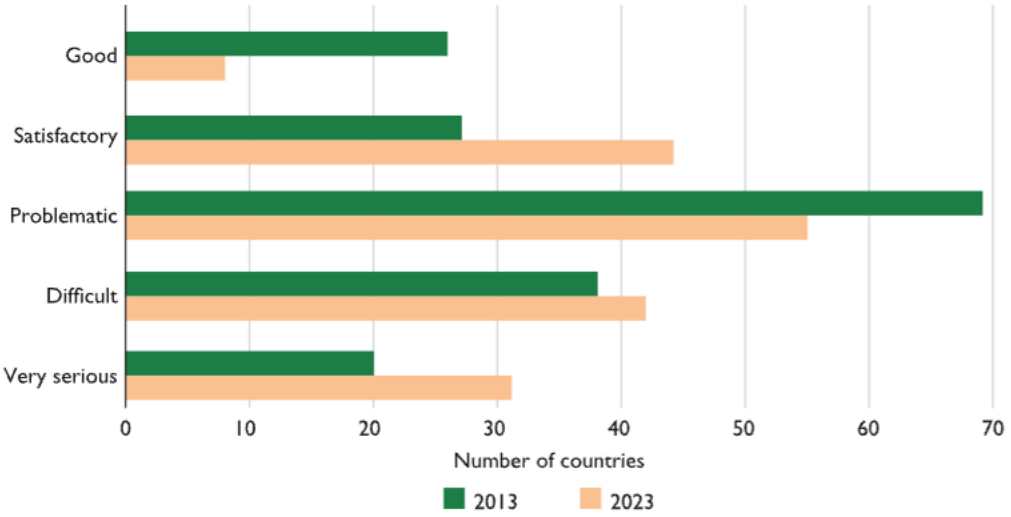


Figure 12.4 The changing state of press freedom
Source: Reporters Without Borders (2023).

also identified a worrying decline in levels of press freedom, summarized in Figure 12.4. While the number of countries whose state of press freedom could be considered good had fallen from 26 to 8, the number whose state of press freedom was either difficult or very serious had risen from 58 to 73. The select club of good countries consisted, in order, of Norway, Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands, Lithuania, and Estonia. The five countries at the bottom of the list were North Korea, China, Vietnam, Iran, and Turkmenistan.

While most of the limitations on the media are politically driven, some are market-driven in the sense that we have seen more of the kind of **media concentration** that has long threatened the marketplace of ideas. This phenomenon dates back to the rise of the earliest mass market newspapers, continued with the early years of television when newspapers began to close or merge in the face of the new competition, and has continued ever since. The risks of concentrated media power in democracies, argues Schlosberg (2017), 'are rapidly evolving and in many ways intensifying, and … the agenda influence of major media brands has not so much waned but become increasingly opaque in a media landscape that is at once converged and fragmented, mass and social, open and closed'.

Media concentration: The consolidation of the ownership of media in the hands of a shrinking number of large corporations.

Consider these examples:

- In 2016, 90 per cent of revenues in the Australian media market went to four corporations: News Corp Australia, Fairfax Media, Seven West Media, and APN News and Media (Lidberg, 2019).
- In Britain, the three biggest publishing companies in 2020 controlled 80 per cent of the national newspaper market, and were making large inroads into the digital news market as well (van Der Merwe, 2020).
- In Mexico, more than 96 per cent of the national broadcast television market is controlled by three companies (Televisa, TV Azteca, and Imagen

TV), while Grupo Televisa is the world's largest Spanish-language media network, reaching throughout the Spanish-speaking world.

- More widely, we live in a world of global media and information technology giants such as Alphabet (parent of Google), Comcast, Meta (parent of Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp), News Corporation, Apple, and Amazon (Birkinbine et al., 2017), as well as rising Chinese giants such as Tencent and Alibaba. The dominance of Facebook is particularly worrying, prompting Lepore (2021) to describe it as 'one of the world's most dangerous monopolies'. Almost entirely controlled by one man (founder and chief executive officer Mark Zuckerberg), it has nearly 3 billion active users, and – argue Frenkel and Kang (2021) – places the goal of global domination above any concerns about the misinformation and emotional debates it encourages.

The concentration of media ownership is a problem for several reasons: it means less editorial independence, it poses threats to media pluralism and diversity, it ties the editorial policies of media outlets to the interests of the corporations that own them, it undermines the capacity of media to serve the public interest, and – with online sources – it threatens the concept of **net neutrality**. Just as a key indicator of authoritarianism is censorship or control of the media, so a key indicator of democracy is the absence of such controls: even while the law protects freedom of speech, limits can be placed by the owners of media outlets as the market becomes less open and competitive.

Net neutrality: The idea that internet service providers should treat all internet communications equally, and not discriminate on the basis of access, content, users, or sources.

Other limitations on the media in democracies are driven by the hold of populist ideas and the leaders who espouse them. It is ironic that while populism (as we saw in Chapter 6) is supposedly about taking powers away from political elites and returning them to 'the people', in practice it has often meant efforts to replace one elite with another and to curb media freedoms along the way. In the United States, for example, the Trump administration (2017–21) became infamous for its repeated complaints about 'fake news', its active spread of such news in the form of disinformation, its vilification of the media, and Trump's own characterization of journalists as 'human scum' or 'the enemy of the people'. His tactics were hardly new: the German Nazi party often criticised the Lügenpresse (the 'lying press'), and Joseph Stalin made extensive use of the phrase 'enemy of the people'. Nonetheless, Trump's tactics were adopted by multiple autocratic governments, which were often encouraged to respond to their critics in similar terms (Downie, 2020). While Trump ultimately failed to exert the kind of control over the public agenda that he would have liked, it was not for want of trying.

In Hungary, meanwhile, the government of Viktor Orbán (in power 1998–2002 and again after 2010) has weakened formal checks on its authority, has censored and intimidated journalists, has co-opted media into the political system, and has encouraged the consolidation of media outlets into government-friendly media companies. It has also, as Csaky (2019) describes it, crafted a new political reality by using these new companies to flood the media landscape with the government's political messages, allowing it 'to dominate the

Janos Kummer / Stringer

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán speaks with the press during the 2022 Hungarian parliamentary elections in which the populist leader scored a crushing victory that returned him to a fourth term. His actions have been associated with efforts to strengthen the powers of his office and undermine press freedom in Hungary.

political agenda, divert public discussion away from sensitive issues, and ultimately control and manipulate the public sphere'.

Offsetting some of these effects in much of Western Europe is the continued importance of public radio and television, which is still active in most democracies, producing high quality and usually balanced political reporting for a discerning audience (consider National Public Radio in the United States, the BBC in Britain, ARD in Germany, SVT/Radio in Sweden, and the multiple countries in Europe that support public television with a required television licence fee). A recent survey (Matsa, 2018) found that adults continued to have a high sense of attachment to public broadcasters, with about half of British adults naming the BBC as their main source for news, for example, and just under 40 per cent of Swedish and Dutch adults for their equivalent public sources.

The relatively high levels of trust in public media accentuate another problem faced by media in democracies, which is that of declining public trust. An example of this is offered by the Edelman Trust Barometer introduced in Chapter 6, which has surveyed levels of trust in government, business, media, and non-governmental organizations since 2001. Based on research in 28 countries, its 2023 survey found that only half of respondents trusted the media, the figures ranging from a high of 79 per cent in China to a low of 27 per cent in South Korea. Interestingly, trust was highest in hybrid and authoritarian states, and lowest in the most democratic states (see Figure 12.5). Majorities felt that journalists were deliberately trying to mislead, and that news organizations were

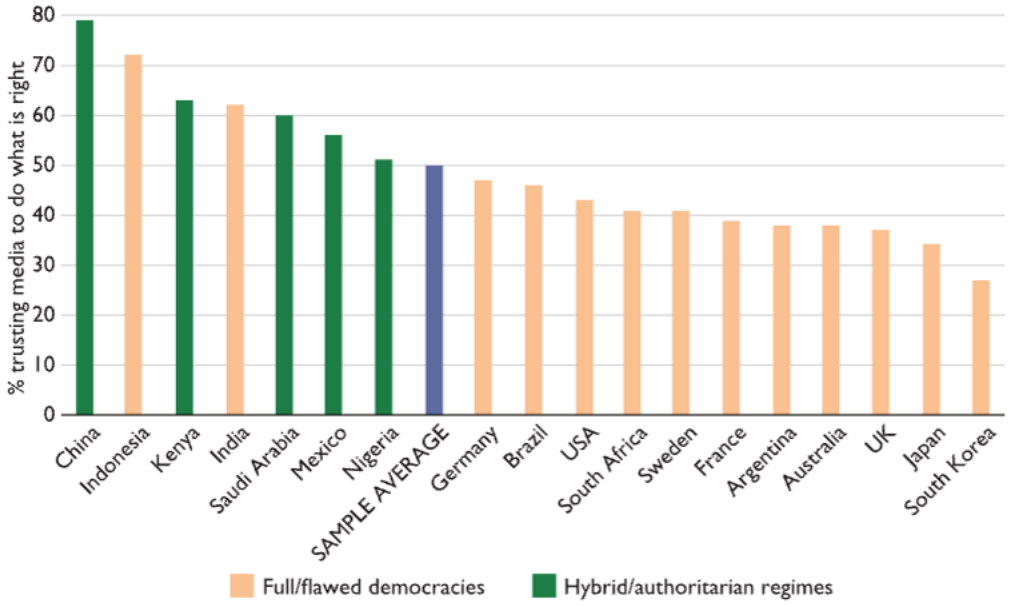


Figure 12.5 Comparing levels of trust in the media
Source: Based on Edelman Trust Barometer (2023).

more concerned with supporting an ideology or political position than with informing the public. At the same time, only one in four admitted to having good 'information hygiene': engaging with the news, avoiding echo chambers (see following section), verifying the information they received, and not amplifying unvetted information. Clearly, freedom of the press will always be compromised as long as trust in the media is low.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE POST-TRUTH WORLD

When the digital revolution in mass media began to take hold in the early 2000s, it was assumed, argue van Dijk and Hacker (2018), that it would have many positive political effects, such as improved information retrieval, more public debate, and even higher rates of political participation. The story, though, has been mixed. The good news is that copious new amounts of information have been made available via the internet, while political leaders and parties can communicate more often and more directly with citizens, and people who would not previously have been able to communicate with one another are now connected by social media. This has helped bring like-minded groups of people together in coordinated political events or demonstrations to a degree that was previously impossible.

Echo chamber: The phenomenon by which ideas circulate inside a closed system, and users seek out only those sources of information that confirm or amplify their values.

The bad news takes at least four parts. First, there are now so many sources of political information that users can become overwhelmed, and might be tempted to exert control by seeking out (and being reinforced by) sources and information that align with their existing values and preferences. Before the internet, there was more chance of people being exposed to contrasting political ideas; now, they are more likely to feel the effects of the **echo chamber**.

The quality of political debate has also been undermined by the spread of misinformation and disinformation, and by the impact on internet users of exchanges with ubiquitous and often anonymous **internet trolls**. The result has been interference with the free marketplace of ideas, the reinforcement of biases and closed minds, and the promotion of myths and a narrow interpretation of events. It should be no surprise, argues Sustein (2017), that people of different political views find it increasingly difficult even to understand one another.

Internet troll: Someone who deliberately tries to offend or to start online arguments by posting inflammatory and provocative comments.

The second problem of the digital age is that users of social media in particular can have their opinions manipulated by the use of 'computational propaganda' (Howard and Woolley, 2018) such as automated **bots** or robo-tweets, or by sophisticated algorithms that feed users with stories and advertising based on past interests and purchases. A study by Bessi and Ferrara (2016) into the use of bots in US elections found that they had been used to support some candidates, oppose others, point internet users to websites with fake news, automatically retweet messages on X (formerly Twitter) containing key words or phrases, trawl search engines and post news stories meeting specified criteria, and post tweets automatically.

Bot: An application that runs automated tasks on the internet, including the mass distribution of political messages.

As the means of identifying bots have improved, the spread of disinformation has moved to human-curated fake internet accounts that are harder to detect, and has become more professionalized as public relations companies are hired to do the work. According to the Oxford Internet Institute, which monitors efforts by governments and political parties to manipulate public opinion online, the number of countries in which organized disinformation campaigns were run grew from 28 in 2017 to 81 in 2020. Among them were democracies such as Australia, Britain, Germany, Sweden, and the United States (Bradshaw et al., 2020). (See later in this chapter for a discussion about efforts by authoritarian regimes to use social media to undermine democracy.)

The third problem of the digital age concerns the way in which information is manipulated and managed. Jungherr and Schroeder (2021) point out that while digital technologies have changed the public arena, there is little scholarly agreement on just how they have done so. It is clear, though, that search engines and social media platforms 'increasingly mediate and govern the visibility and reach of information, and thus reconfigure the transmission belt between citizens and political elites'. Studies find that while most people agree that the internet offers access to a far wider range of views than is the case with traditional media, it has also deepened the problem of the spread of misinformation and disinformation, and poses new challenges to users in separating truth from fiction. The internet was once described as an information superhighway, but perhaps it is better regarded as a series of gated information communities, many of which are not what they seem: as users seek out fewer sources of news and are subjected more to the influence of bots, algorithms, and echo chambers, so they become more susceptible to the effects of what has become known as the **post-truth world** (see *Exploring Problems 12*).

Post-truth world: The idea that appeals to emotions and personal beliefs have become more influential than objective facts and evidence in shaping public opinion and policy.

EXPLORING PROBLEMS 12

HOW CAN WE PROTECT OURSELVES FROM FALSE NEWS?

The advent of the Trump administration in the United States drew new attention to an old problem: the accuracy of the news we read, hear, or watch (and of the claims made by leaders about the news). Donald Trump regularly warned of the danger of 'fake news', describing reporters at his press conferences as 'unbelievable liars' and 'the most dishonest people'. Despite this, he became notorious for peddling falsehoods: according to data gathered by the *Washington Post*, Trump made a total of 30,573 false or misleading claims during his four years in office (Kessler et al., 2021). These included claims about the size of the crowds at his inauguration, about the circumstances surrounding his two impeachment trials, and about the seriousness of the Covid-19 pandemic. He also refused to acknowledge his defeat in the November 2020 presidential election and persisted in claiming for years afterwards that he had won.

As long as it has been shared, whether by word of mouth from one villager to another, or on a global scale via television or the internet, news has always been subject to manipulation and distortion. Outright lies might be told, inaccuracies may be passed on, subtle efforts may be made to selectively shape facts to create a false impression, those facts may not be reported at all, or news might be described as 'fake' simply because it does not fit with the assumptions of the reader, listener, or viewer. Authoritarian regimes, including communist governments such as China's, are particularly adept at such manipulation. The bigger the lie, implied Adolf Hitler in his book *Mein Kampf*, the more likely it would be that people would believe it.

Among the consequences of the internet is that hackers can break into websites and alter information, that social media can be manipulated to introduce falsehoods to potentially large audiences, and that ordinary people can engage in distortion by posting comments online. The old adage that a lie can travel around the world in the time it takes for the truth to get its boots on has taken on new meaning thanks to lies and misrepresentations that can be subject to 'rumour cascades' as they are copied and spread online. In looking at several thousand such cascades, Vosoughi et al. (2018) concluded that falsehoods spread 'significantly farther, faster, deeper and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information', that fake news was a particular problem with political news, and that the actions of ordinary humans were at least as much involved as were automated internet bots.

- What can we do, as individual consumers of the news, to protect ourselves from the effects of false news?
- What can we do to help ourselves make a distinction between news that is accurate and news that is false?
- Is it a simple matter of consuming a healthy diet of news from diverse and quality sources, and bringing a healthy scepticism to our assessment of the news?
- Should we go further by fact-checking any stories about which we might have doubts, or combining mass media sources with the more objective work of academic scholars and of professionals working in the fields about which we want to learn?

The fourth and newest problem of the digital age is the emerging impact on the news of **artificial intelligence** (AI). Although AI has been welcomed for what it might have to offer business, health care, decision-making, and the handling of data, there are concerns about its implications for the development and presentation of information, making it hard to distinguish between what is real and what has been manipulated. Crawford (2021) argues that AI is neither artificial nor intelligent, and neither autonomous nor rational, but that AI systems are designed to serve existing dominant interests, both reflecting and producing understandings of the world. To understand that AI is fundamentally political, she notes, we need to ask for whom and who decides how it is used. Many have suggested that AI can not only be used to manipulate the truth, but also to facilitate new forms of repression, policing, and surveillance (see, for example, Tinnirello, 2022, and Coeckelbergh, 2024).

Artificial intelligence: A technology that uses computers to mimic human intelligence in order to solve problems and perform tasks, including the generation of news.

So ubiquitous has the manipulation of the news now become, and so patently harmful have been the results, that it has generated a wealth of new comparative studies about its sources and effects. In their analysis of effects of the post-truth world, for example, Farkas and Schou (2019) warn that Western societies in particular are 'under siege' from disinformation circulated by intellectuals, journalists, and political leaders, a trend that they see as 'undermining the very core of democracy'. Meanwhile, in a book sub-titled *How to Save Democracy from Troll Armies, Deceitful Robots, Junk News Operations, and Political Operatives*, Howard (2020) warns of the work of 'lie machines' that attack public figures, spread conspiracy theories, and create divisions. Davis et al. (2020) are less certain, though, and argue that mainstream news media have tended 'to trade less in outright distortion than in a more subtle agenda-setting that promotes elite [perspectives]'.

While much of the debate about disinformation has focused on the countries that make the greatest use of the internet and social media, the problem is global in its reach. This is the point made by Cosentino (2020), who ties it to the declining levels of trust in government, and to the persistence (and growth) of economic inequality. He quotes examples of Russian trolls trying to influence the outcome of foreign elections, Facebook users spreading misrepresentations that supported Buddhist violence against Muslims in Myanmar, WhatsApp users helping spread disinformation during the 2018 presidential elections in Brazil, and fictional narratives being spread by American and European social media users about the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

None of this is new, of course, because history is replete with examples of efforts to manipulate news and information. The problem has become more serious, though, as reflected in the annual reports on global democracy from Freedom House. It notes ongoing controls in China, Russia, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Syria, but also points with alarm to trends in democracies such as Hungary, Israel, India, and even the United States. The methods used, it notes, include government-backed ownership changes, regulatory and financial pressure, public denunciations of journalists, proactive support such as state contracts to friendly outlets, favourable regulatory decisions, and preferential access to state information. The goal, it concludes, is to 'make the press serve those in power rather than the public' (Repucci, 2019).

THE MEDIA IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

In June 2020, a 34-year-old musician named Hachalu Hundessa was shot and killed in a suburb of the Ethiopian capital city of Addis Ababa. He also happened to be a political activist for the Oromo, the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, and his death sparked protests in several parts of the country. Ethiopian prime minister Aiy Ahmed expressed his regrets, describing Hundessa as a 'shining young artist' and announcing a full investigation into 'this evil act'. Within hours, though, people in several parts of Ethiopia were reporting problems with internet access, and it was soon established that the government had taken down the internet for the entire country in a deliberate effort to curb public debate about Hundessa's murder and to control the protests. It was to remain down for two weeks.

Although barely one in five Ethiopians had internet access at the time, Ethiopia became the first country in the world to institute a countrywide shutdown. Many other countries have instituted local shutdowns, including Bangladesh, Colombia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russia, Senegal, Turkey, and Uganda (NetBlocks, 2024), but none had gone as far as Ethiopia, an authoritarian regime whose government persists in refusing to give up control over the national telecommunications market. The shutdown reflected the way in which 'freedom of the press', which once referred to the openness of the printed press, and then of broadcast media, has increasingly meant 'freedom on the internet', which governments find easier to control than older forms of media. It is relatively easy to shut down individual websites, mobile networks, or even the entire internet, to impose regulatory controls of internet providers, to censor websites, and to punish violations of laws on online speech and activities. What was once regarded as a 'liberating technology',

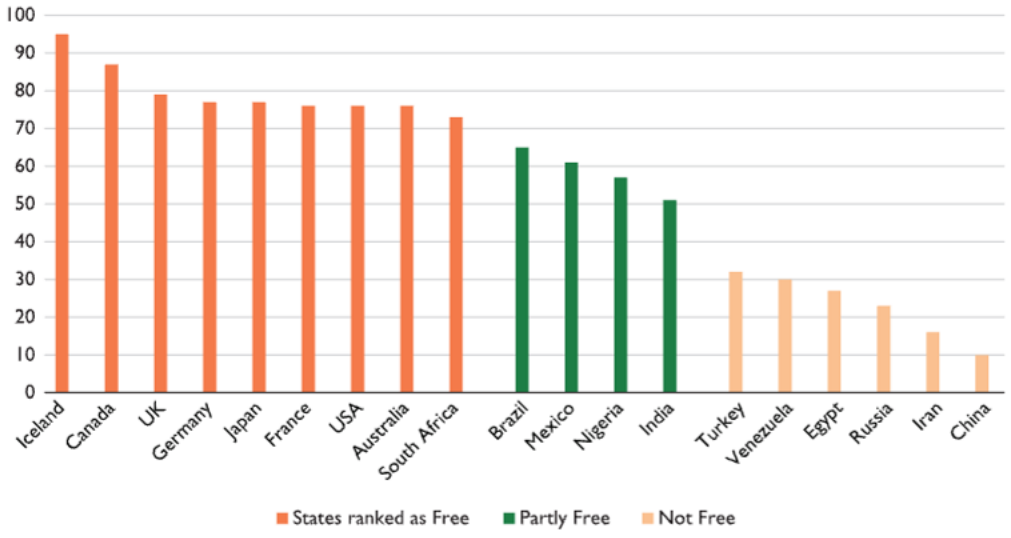


Figure 12.6 Internet freedom compared

Source: Based on Freedom House (2023). Scores are out of 100, with higher scores indicating greater freedom. Only 65 countries ranked. Sweden not ranked.

argue Shahbaz and Funk (2019), 'has become a conduit for surveillance and electoral manipulation', with repressive regimes converting social media 'into instruments for political distortion and societal control'. For some of the results, see the comparative data in Figure 12.6, generated by Freedom House on the basis of measures such as obstacles to access, limits on content, and violations of user rights.

Just as a free and open media environment is one of the signs of a healthy democracy, so tight controls over the media are an indication of authoritarianism. The World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders, 2023) has painted a grim picture of the state of the media in authoritarian regimes, noting the numerous limits imposed on media, including incidents of violence against journalists. In its 2023 report, it warned of the global effects of the 'digital ecosystem's fake content industry', noting the blurring of the differences between 'true and false, real and artificial, facts and artifices, … [and] the unprecedented ability to tamper with content'. The problems are being worsened by advances in artificial intelligence.

The results for selected countries (including most of our Spotlights) are shown in Figure 12.7. While democracies seem to come out well, and authoritarian regimes do not, the picture is not that simple. Democracies might boast about the extent to which their citizens enjoy the benefits of a free flow of information, and may criticize authoritarian regimes for their efforts to limit that flow, but both types – in their own ways – impose limits on information, and make efforts to shape the message. The most that we can say is that media coverage of politics in democracies is relatively open, while in authoritarian regimes it is relatively limited. Having said that, though, we know less about the dynamics of the media in authoritarian settings: supporters of authoritarian governments are unwilling to be frank about how they work, while opponents are unwilling to speak out, or have been driven underground.

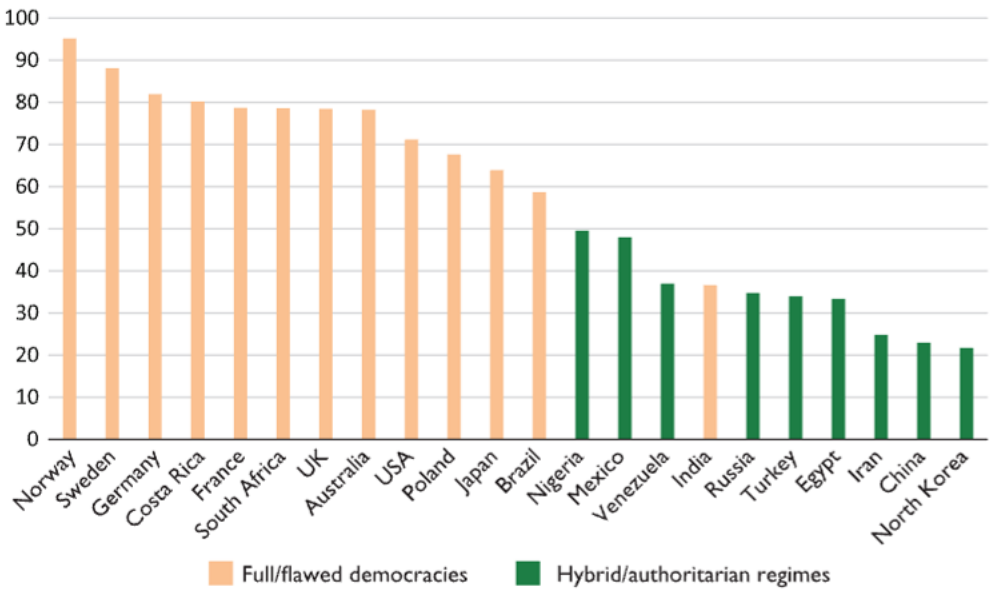


Figure 12.7 Media freedom compared

Source: Based on data in Reporters Without Borders (2023). Scores are out of 100, with Norway ranking highest (95.18) and North Korea lowest (21.72). For the latest information, see Reporters Without Borders at https://rsf.org.

Role	Features
Controlling the news	Controlling the flow of news and information in a manner that suits the regime and drowns dissent.
Stability	Sustaining the stability of the regime by bolstering its legitimacy and reassuring supporters of its grip on government.
Discrediting the opposition	Attacking and discrediting the opposition and alternative political ideas.
Undermining democracy	Using social media to undermine democracy in other parts of the world.

Figure 12.8 The media in authoritarian regimes

Nonetheless, we can learn much by contrasting the roles of the media in democratic and authoritarian regimes. In the former, as we saw earlier, their roles are to inform, to hold governments accountable, and to provide the glue that binds a healthy civil society. In the latter, their roles are quite different (see Figure 12.8). Above all, the media are restrained by governments so as to control the flow of news and information, sustaining and justifying the actions of leaders and ruling parties while limiting dissent. This is made easier by the relative lack of resources within the media sector in authoritarian regimes, which limits professionalism and increases vulnerability to pressure. Official television stations and subsidized newspapers reproduce the regime's line, while critical journalists are harassed, and the media sector often develops an instinct for self-preservation through self-censorship. The consequence is an inadequate information flow to the top, expanding the gap between state and society, and leading ultimately to flawed decisions.

The media in authoritarian regimes also play a stabilizing role by presenting a narrative that is designed to strengthen the legitimacy of the regime by projecting an image of power and security. Authoritarian leaders and ruling parties routinely figure prominently in the news, and their work is always cast in a positive light, with problems routinely blamed on opponents and agitators, while threats to the regime (such as recent anti-government demonstrations in Belarus and Iran) are blamed on 'foreign enemies'. Consider these examples:

- In North Korea, which is ranked in last place by Reporters Without Borders in terms of media freedom, the media serve not to provide objective information, but to convey **propaganda** in support of the regime. The news routinely leads with activities of the leadership, and statements by the government or the ruling Worker's Party, while entertainment programming includes dramas and operas conveying revolutionary messages, and internet access is severely controlled. The regime even used the declining weight of Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un in mid-2021 to suggest that he

Propaganda: Information used to promote a particular political cause or ideology with a view to controlling or changing public minds.

was sharing with his people the hardships of sanctions, food shortages, and the Covid-19 pandemic.

- China has worked hard to counter evidence that the Covid-19 pandemic originated there, exploiting social media to spread rumours that the virus was created in the United States. 'All parties should firmly say "no" to the dissemination of [foreign] disinformation', argued China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in early 2021. 'In the face of trumped-up charges, it is justified and proper to bust lies and clarify rumours by setting out the facts' (Kinetz, 2021).

The third role played by the state-controlled media in authoritarian regimes is to isolate and discredit the opposition, giving it as limited a voice as possible (or no voice at all in the most repressive regimes), reporting its activities in purely negative terms, or dismissing criticism of the regime as 'fake news', while often spreading its own disinformation to undermine the opposition. Attacks on media credibility are becoming more widespread, argues Lees (2018), in an effort to spread seeds of doubt and as an excuse to curb opposition activities. In Tanzania, for example, four independent newspapers and two radio stations were shut down in 2017–18 after government accusations that their reporting was 'inaccurate' and that they were spreading 'false information'.

A fourth and newer role for the media in those authoritarian regimes with the necessary resources has been the exploitation of social media to advance the political goals of the regime while undermining democracy in other parts of the world. Research by the Oxford Internet Institute (see earlier in this chapter) has found propaganda and disinformation campaigns emanating from more than 80 countries around the world (including many democracies), involving government agencies, political parties, private contractors, interest groups, and ordinary people. China has been particularly active in using social media networks to influence foreign public opinion, with one recent study (Schliebs et al., 2021) finding that its diplomats and state-backed media outlets are active on Twitter and Facebook in pursuing a strategy to 'tell China's story well'.

How exactly do authoritarian rulers limit independent journalism? In its 2019 annual report on the state of the media, Freedom House (2019) outlined what it described as 'an illiberal regime's toolbox' for achieving media dominance, consisting of a combination of economic, legal, and extra-legal tools, including the following:

- Arbitrary tax investigations.
- Financially draining lawsuits against critics.
- The selective enforcement of laws and licensing practices.
- Verbal harassment of critics.
- Generous access to leaders and information for loyal news outlets.

The report also noted instances of efforts to build a 'parallel reality', quoting the examples of the governments of Hungary and Serbia (two flawed democracies with illiberal tendencies): 'Flooding the media landscape with their own political messages allows those in power to dominate the political agenda, divert public discussion away from sensitive issues, and ultimately control and manipulate the public sphere.'

In some countries, controls on the media are imposed through a broad application of the meaning of often vague limits on expression; as an example, see *Spotlight 12* on Venezuela at the end of this chapter. In others, controls on the media are more uncompromising, with opposition journalists being threatened, imprisoned, forced into exile, or murdered. The extent of the problem is reflected in the work of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which maintains a website dedicated to listing the names of journalists killed in the exercise of their profession. Between 1993 and early 2024, it had identified just over 1,600 journalists who had died, some killed in conflicts while others had been murdered (UNESCO, 2024). The five countries with the highest death tolls were Iraq (201), Mexico (154), the Philippines (a flawed democracy) (116), Syria (115), and Pakistan (82).

Although authoritarian governments can control formal media outlets, they find it harder to control the rumour mill or the information underground. Based on interviews with defectors, Baek (2016) paints a picture of a network of citizens in North Korea who take great risks to circulate illicit media content such as foreign films, television shows, soap operas, books, and encyclopaedias, much of it stored on USB flash drives that are hard for officials to find. More information is made available using the now dated (but still widely used) technology of shortwave radio. This circulation fosters an awareness of life outside North Korea, Baek argues, affecting the social and political consciousness of North Koreans.

Table 12.3: The internet and the Arab Spring

	Internet users		Population using the internet (%) 2009	Regime overthrown in 2011?	Population using the internet (%) 2021
	2000	2009			
Morocco	100,000	10.3 million	33	No	88
Saudi Arabia	200,000	7.7 million	27	No	100
Tunisia	100,000	2.8 million	27	Yes	79
Egypt	450,000	12.6 million	16	Yes	72
Algeria	50,000	4.1 million	12	No	71
Libya	10,000	323,000	5	Yes	18 (2014)
Yemen	15,000	370,000	2	Yes	27 (2017)

Source: Adapted from Wheeler and Mintz (2012: table 10.1), updated with 2021 figures from International Telecommunication Union (2023).

The effect of the internet on political communication in authoritarian regimes is still debated, with many analysts describing digital technology as a double-edged sword that can both strengthen and weaken political systems (*Foreign Affairs*, 2019). The gap between hopes and realities is illustrated by events surrounding the Arab Spring. As Table 12.3 shows, internet access grew dramatically in the first decade of the new millennium in the Middle East and North Africa, allowing citizens to communicate with each other without the intermediary of state-owned or state-controlled media. Those communications helped people organize opposition and demonstrations, which fed into the overthrow of regimes in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen. For Wheeler and Mintz (2012), it seemed possible that the grounds for change could be laid 'by people using new media tools to discover and generate new spaces within which [to] voice their dissent and assert their presence in pursuit of bettering their lives'.

As we saw in Chapter 5, though, the Arab Spring promised more than it delivered over the longer term, because the democratic upsurge died quickly in most of those countries where it had emerged. Internet access in these countries has continued to grow, but the control of their authoritarian regimes typically remains unchecked. Rather than seeing the spread of democracy on the back of the internet, much of the non-democratic world has instead experienced **digital authoritarianism**: more control over internet access through state control, massive censorship, and even – as in the case of Russia – talk of building domestic internets that can operate separately from the global internet. China and Russia have even been exporting surveillance technology that allows governments to keep an eye on their domestic internet communications. 'The flow of information,' notes Yayboke (2020) 'is increasingly dictated at the national level, limiting the competition of ideas and suppressing the rights of individuals who operate in the open and must follow the rules while advantaging those who already break the law with little consequence.'

Digital authoritarianism: The use of information technology by authoritarian leaders to increase social and political control.

Even while authoritarian governments have been exerting control through their manipulation of the internet, though, ordinary people have not always been persuaded by what they are seeing or hearing. In the case of Russia, for example, the internet has replaced television (as it has in many countries) as the main source of information: according to the international accounting and consultancy firm Deloitte, 72 per cent of Russians used the internet as their main source of news in 2020, compared to 58 per cent who used television, and 40 per cent who used social media. However, levels of trust in all three sources were low: only 39 per cent trusted the internet, 23 per cent trusted television, and just 16 per cent trusted social media (Deloitte, 2020). With the withdrawal of Deloitte from Russia in early 2023, it became harder to find such information.

It has long been said that knowledge is power, with the implication that the manipulation of knowledge (or, at least, of information) can impact the degree of power that states and political leaders have, and the health of the democratic process. In her assessment of digital inclusion and exclusion, Park (2017) argues that information is the key to how a digital society 'adds value and redistributes

power', and that 'the same information that existed in the analogue world can exponentially increase in power once shared on digital networks'. These are still early days in our efforts to understand the impact of the internet and social media on the way that information is made available, limited, or manipulated, but experience seems to suggest that new media are often being used – even in democracies – to manipulate knowledge in a way that undermines the free market of ideas and that plays into the hands of authoritarian leaders. This is a disturbing trend that needs to be monitored and studied closely.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Do the mass media shape or reflect public opinion?
- What can ordinary people do to protect themselves from false news?
- Do we have a problem today of too much variety and choice in our sources of news?
- What are the effects of imbalances in internet access?
- What would take to help us rebound from the current era of growing limits on free media?
- Is the problem of propaganda notably worse in authoritarian than in democratic systems, or are the attempts to influence public thinking simply couched differently?

KEY CONCEPTS

- Artificial intelligence
- Bot
- Digital authoritarianism
- Disinformation
- Echo chamber
- Internet
- Internet troll
- Net neutrality
- Mass media
- Media concentration
- Misinformation
- Political communication
- Post-truth world
- Propaganda
- Self-selection
- Social media

FURTHER READING

Davis, Aeron, Natalie Fenton, and Des Freeman (2020) *Media, Democracy, and Social Change: Re-imagining Political Communication* (SAGE). An assessment of the political implications of recent changes in the media, including the move from traditional to digital outlets, and the effects of disinformation.

Iosifidis, Petros, and Nicholas Nicoli (2021) *Digital Democracy, Social Media, and Disinformation* (Routledge). A study of the dynamics of digital democracy, network society, disinformation, and fake news.

Kenski, Kate, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (eds) (2017) *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication* (Oxford University Press). An edited collection of studies of the history, current shape, effects, and potential future of political communication.

Oliver, Mary Beth, Arthur A. Raney, and Jennings Bryant (eds) (2020) *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, 4th edn (Routledge). An edited collection of studies of developments in our understanding of the effects of the media on public knowledge, thinking, and behaviour.

Robertson, Alexa (2015) *Media and Politics in a Globalizing World* (Polity). An assessment of the impact of globalization and technology on the relationship between media and politics.

van Dijk, Jan A. G. M., and Kenneth L. Hacker (2018) *Internet and Democracy in the Network Society* (Routledge). An assessment of the impact of the internet on politics, asking whether the positive effects once predicted have actually happened.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Visit **bloomsbury.pub/comparative-government-and-politics-13e** to access additional materials to support teaching and learning.

SPOTLIGHT 12
VENEZUELA

PROFILE

Venezuela should be a Latin American success story, but a combination of political and economic problems has resulted in its recent downgrading in the Democracy Index from a hybrid to an authoritarian regime. It is rich in oil (as well as coal, iron ore, bauxite, and other minerals) but most of its people live in poverty. Much of the failure can be attributed to Hugo Chávez, elected president in 1998 on a populist left-wing platform. His *chavista* supporters claimed that his policies of economic nationalization and expanded social programmes helped the poor, but his critics charged that they contributed to inflation and unemployment. Although he died in 2013, his successor Nicolás Maduro has built on the Chávez legacy, continuing to centralize political control, demonize opponents, and distort the economy. One of the effects has been an exodus that has led more than 7 million people to leave Venezuela since 2015.

Form of government	Federal presidential republic consisting of 23 states and a Capital District. Independence achieved 1811, and most recent constitution adopted 1999.
Legislature	Unicameral National Assembly of 165 members elected for fixed and renewable five-year terms.
Executive	Presidential. A president elected for an unlimited number of six-year terms, supported by vice-president and cabinet of ministers.
Judiciary	Supreme Tribunal of Justice, with 32 members elected by the National Assembly to 12-year terms.
Electoral system	President elected in national contest using a plurality system. National Assembly elected using mixed member proportional representation, with 60 per cent elected by single-member plurality and the balance by proportional representation.
Parties	Multi-party, with a changing roster of parties currently dominated by the United Socialist Party of Venezuela.
Population	28 million
Gross Domestic Product	$482 billion
Per capita GDP	$15,975
Democracy Index rating	Authoritarian
Freedom House rating	Not Free
Corruption score	13/100
Human Development Index rating	Medium

PART 3 PROCESSES

CHAPTERS

13 Political participation
14 Elections
15 Political parties
16 Interest groups
17 Public policy
18 Political economy

PREVIEW

The final part of the book focuses on the ways in which people relate to government and politics. It begins with a survey of the different forms of political participation, and then reviews and compares the different electoral systems used around the world. Two chapters then describe and compare political parties and interest groups, and their contrasting roles in political systems. The book closes with chapters focused on the outputs of government and politics; the first looks at public policy and the different ways of understanding and comparing it, while the final chapter deals with the specific topic of political economy.

Dinodia Photo via Getty Images

13

Political participation

CONTENTS

- Understanding political participation
- Patterns of participation
- Voting
- Public opinion
- Political participation in authoritarian regimes

PREVIEW

The quality of government depends to a high degree on the extent to which citizens are willing or able to take part in the process of governing. Although there are many different channels available for participation, two points will soon become clear in this chapter. First, the quantity and the quality of participation vary not only between regime types but also within individual countries over time and among different social groups. Even in democracies, rates of participation are far from equal. Second, even as the variety of forms of participation expands, many people still choose not to express themselves, or are poorly informed about the issues at stake. In authoritarian regimes, of course, their views and opinions are often not much considered to begin with.

This chapter begins with a review of the many ways in which people can participate in government, ranging from the conventional to the unconventional and the illegal. It then looks at who participates and why, considering the problem of political exclusion, and then focusing on how women engage with government and politics, asking why participation is still so often dominated by men. The chapter then looks at voters and at what motivates them, before discussing the links between participation and public opinion, explaining how opinion is measured, and discussing the implications of variable levels of knowledge about political affairs. The chapter ends with a discussion of how participation is managed and limited in authoritarian regimes, pointing out that levels of participation are often higher than might be expected.

HIGHLIGHTS

- There are so many different ways in which we can participate in government and politics that we may be in danger of expanding the definition of participation too widely.
- We know who participates in politics, and who does not, but the reasons behind patterns of participation vary by time and place.
- While political engagement by women has increased substantially, inequalities in their access to positions of power continue.
- The habits and motivations of voters have long been a puzzle, with several different explanatory theories developed, but none offering universal answers.
- The science of measuring public opinion has improved, but the political and technological challenges it faces have grown.
- In authoritarian regimes, clientelism and mobilized participation are important phenomena, but gauging public opinion is often difficult.

UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

On most democratic measures, Jamaica scores well. It is rated as Free by Freedom House, and as a flawed democracy by the Democracy Index. Elections are mainly free and fair, parties operate without many restrictions, and freedom of expression is protected. In only one area – political participation – does it rank relatively low, with a score on the Democracy Index of just 5.0 out of 10. This places it lower than several authoritarian regimes, and gives it the same ranking as Venezuela and Russia. The explanation, according to Freedom House (2022), lies mainly in the baleful influence of organized crime and corruption. Powerful criminal organizations can influence voters who live in areas under their control, women are underrepresented in government (even though Jamaica has had a woman prime minister: Portia Simpson-Miller, in 2006–07 and again in 2012–16), and the LGBTQ community suffers harassment and violence.

The case of Jamaica stands as a reminder that a healthy democracy means not just effective government institutions and the protection of rights, but an environment in which citizens are encouraged to engage with the political process. Through **political participation**, people try to influence the composition or policies of government, and to take part in debates about public issues. The channels available vary by time and place, and the reasons why people choose different channels can tell us much about the state of democracy and about the level of public content (or discontent) with government. In democratic regimes, people can choose whether to be involved in politics, to what extent, and through what channels. In authoritarian regimes, there is less choice and a higher degree of political manipulation, designed to give the impression of popular support rather than to allow open expression of views.

Political participation: Actions by individuals intended to influence government and the actions it takes.

Table 13.1 summarizes the many different ways in which the citizens of democracies can engage with government and politics, if they choose to do so. The more **conventional** forms include voting in elections, contacting representatives, and supporting electoral campaigns. They also include several newer options that have become mainstream as a result of changes in technology and new ideas about the most effective ways of quickly making a point: these channels include blogging, tweeting, engaging in social media debates, joining flash mobs, or simply seeking political information online. The more **unconventional** forms of participation include taking part in demonstrations or organizing boycotts, and are popular among younger citizens who are tired of 'politics as usual'. Among the most frustrated and marginalized of citizens, meanwhile, participation can spill over into breaking the law or turning to violence, as in the cases of civil disobedience or terrorist acts against the state.

Conventional participation: Takes place within formal political processes and the law.

Unconventional participation: Takes place outside formal political processes or even the law.

The distinction between conventional and unconventional forms of participation is increasingly blurry, thanks to changing views about how they are defined, and the growing variety of channels available for participation. The options have become so diverse, argue Theocaris and van Deth (2018), that we may have to ask ourselves more carefully how we can recognize participation when we see it, and how we can measure new forms of participation without

Table 13.1: Forms of political participation

More conventional	Voting in elections
	Joining or donating to political parties
	Joining, supporting, or donating to interest groups
	Contacting elected representatives
	Signing petitions
	Clicktivism (online participation)
	Volunteering in political campaigns or running elections
	Organizing community campaigns
	Attending political rallies or meetings
	Wearing badges or displaying political signs or posters
	Engaging with social movements
	Raising money for candidates, parties, or causes
	Running for elected office
More unconventional	Taking part in peaceful demonstrations, protests, or walkouts
	Organizing or taking part in consumer boycotts
Illegal	Civil disobedience
	Occupation of buildings or public spaces
	Sabotaging the efforts of parties, candidates, or elected officials
	Hacktivism (malicious cyber activities)
	Politically motivated crime
	Political violence, including terrorism and assassination

falling into the trap of expanding the definition too broadly. Our changing understanding is reflected in the contrasting findings of two scholars. Grasso (2016) has used data from Western Europe to argue that there is a generational shift taking place, with younger citizens becoming disengaged, and less likely to participate in voting, supporting parties, or even political activism. Meanwhile, Peters (2018) argues that rather than people disengaging, they have reallocated their time and attention to new forms of participation.

Peters also raises two interesting questions about how we should understand and define participation: should it involve both active and passive forms (learning about government and politics is passive, and yet is also a form of engagement), and should it include activities aimed only at government, or can those activities aimed at institutions outside government (such as business) also be considered a form of participation? Theocaris and van Deth (2018) also suggest that efforts by citizens to influence each other can be defined as participation. Partly as a result, what may look like a low level of participation, when measured using conventional definitions of the term, may actually be quite high. This is particularly true if we take a more sophisticated and inclusive view of **digital activism**.

Digital activism: Political activism that uses social media, email, podcasts, and other digital media. Also known as internet activism, online activism, and hashtag activism.

As to why people participate, there are multiple possible explanations (see Figure 13.1). One perspective, dating back to the ancient Greeks, is that involvement in collective decision-making in democracies is both a civic duty and an exercise in personal development, widening individual horizons and providing

Role	Features
Idealism	Believing in the possibilities of democracy and hoping to protect what is important or to bring about change.
Being heard	Wanting to be counted as part of the potential solution to the problems facing society.
Information	A means of learning about government and staying informed.
Mobilization	Encouraged by parties, political leaders, or media to support or oppose incumbents.
Civic duty	Participation as a responsibility of citizens, to help influence and shape government.
Engagement	A means of being connected with government and public affairs.
Enjoyment	Participating for social reasons, engagement with the community, or the thrill of the competition.

Figure 13.1 Participation in democratic regimes

political education. From this standpoint, participation benefits both the political system and the individual, and non-participants are free-riders who gain from the efforts of others.

A second perspective, rooted in practical realities rather than high ideals, suggests that people are not naturally political animals, and that higher levels of participation might be less a sign of a healthy democracy than of unresolved tensions within a political system. Demonstrations, protests, and even high voter turnout can be signs of a system that is overheating, rather than one that is in good health. In normal times, by contrast, limited participation may indicate the system's success in meeting people's demands, freeing them to pursue other activities.

In these two accounts, all that matters in a democracy is that citizens monitor political events and become involved as necessary; that the channels are open, not that they are in constant use. Schudson (1998) once suggested that even when citizens appeared inactive, they might remain poised for action, like parents watching their children play in a swimming pool. Especially as we watch several conventional forms of participation decline, vigilance can even be seen as a central mechanism of democracy: 'To be watchful, alert, and on guard are essential attributes of citizenship', suggests Rosanvallon (2008), who argues that monitoring should be understood as a form of participation, and vigilance as 'a mode of action'.

PATTERNS OF PARTICIPATION

It is important to look not just at channels of participation but at patterns of participation: who is engaging, how they are engaging, how often they are engaging, and why they are (or are not) taking part. One potential sign of a problem, as we will see in Chapter 14, is that turnout at elections in many

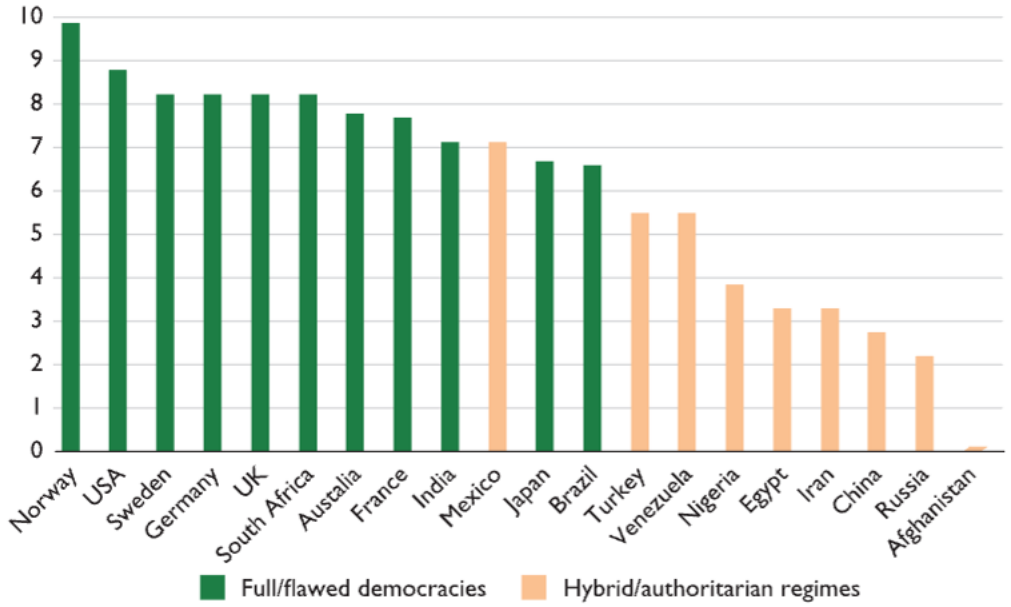


Figure 13.2 Comparing levels of political participation

Source: Based on Economist Intelligence Unit (2023), which scores countries between 0 and 10.

countries is declining. In a related phenomenon, as we will see in Chapter 15, support for political parties is declining. However, voting and party activities are only two parts of a complex picture: participatory rates and trends vary across time and from one country to another (and even within countries), and while trends may often be downwards in terms of some kinds of activities, such as voting, they are heading upwards in other kinds, particularly those associated with social media. Figure 13.2 offers some broad comparative data on political participation, focusing on our Spotlight countries.

The differences are explained by a combination of opportunity, levels of trust in government, the degrees to which citizens believe that taking part actually makes a difference, and the extent to which governments welcome participation. On most counts, the citizens of democratic regime will be more inclined to participate and those of authoritarian regimes less so. There are also individual sets of explanations for different countries: voter turnout is low among the young in Japan, for example, as well as among the poor in Brazil, depressing overall participation in both countries, while voter turnout is higher among women in Norway, the USA, and Sweden, helping raise their numbers (see later in this chapter for more details).

For decades, the most striking result of studies of levels of participation in democracies was how little most people engaged through any means other than voting. In an influential comparative analysis of participation in the United States that drew an analogy from ancient Rome, Milbrath and Goel (1977) divided the population into a small group of active gladiators, a large group of spectators, and a mid-sized group of disengaged apathetics (see Figure 13.3). This classification has since been applied to other democracies, goes beyond voting, and still influences the way participation is understood. A study by George and Leidner (2019), for example, applies the hierarchy to ten different kinds of

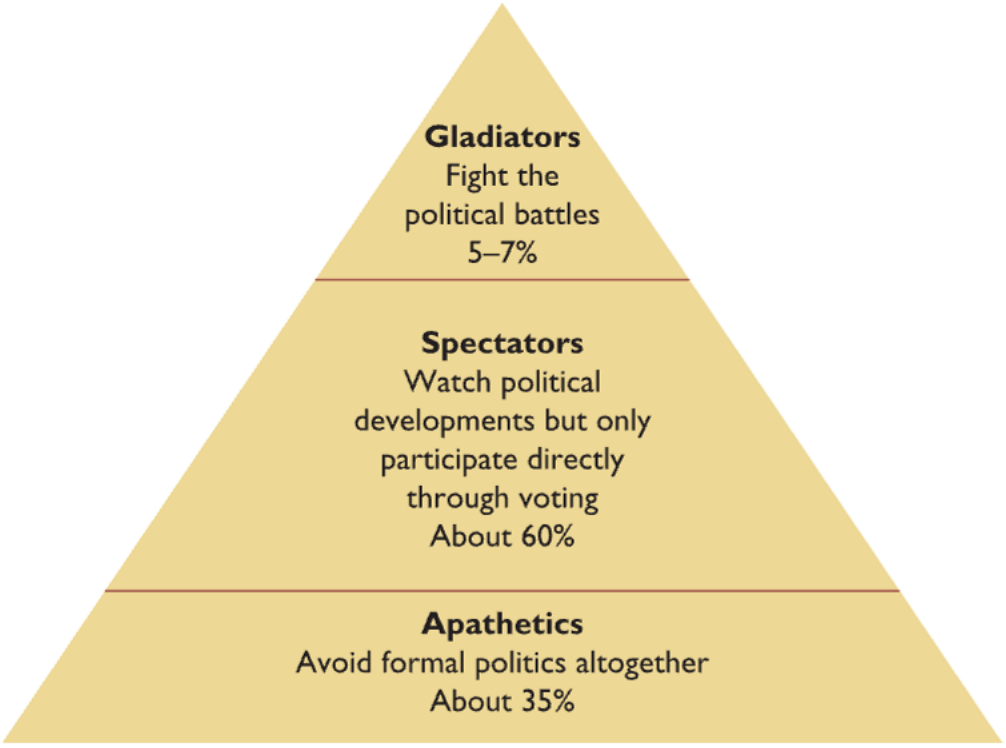


Figure 13.3 Degrees of participation in democratic regimes

digital activism, giving data activism (resisting the gathering of personal data, or using data to try and achieve political and social change) as an example of the work of gladiators, and **clicktivism** as an example of spectating.

Clicktivism: A form of political engagement involving online activities such as sharing tweets or trending hashtags, or supporting online petitions. Pejoratively known as slacktivism.

The small proportion of gladiators probably comes as no surprise, and yet while such people are likely to exert more political influence, they are far from a cross-section of society. In most democratic regimes, levels of participation tend to be highest among older, better-educated, upper-income citizens. Why is this? According to Verba et al. (1995), two factors are important: resources and political interest. What we mean by 'resources' is that people in high-status groups are more likely to have the time to engage, the knowledge needed to understand politics, the status to be heard, and the communication skills to persuasively present their political views.

The higher levels of voter turnout among those with one particular resource – higher incomes – is confirmed in a study by Matsubayashi and Sakaiya (2021), looking at data in more than 50 mainly European, Asian, and Latin American countries between 1996 and 2015. Their conclusion about the effects: 'If voters are wealthier than non-voters and the former has different policy preferences from the latter, the government is more likely to produce policies that correspond to the preferences of the wealthy.' They also argue, though, that higher income inequality results in a higher occurrence of vote buying (see later in this chapter), and that as this becomes more common, turnout among low-income citizens is likely to grow, while turnout among high-income citizens will decrease as they lose political influence.

WILLIAM WEST / Contributor

People carry a petition including the names of victims of domestic violence during a "March 4 Justice" rally in Melbourne, Australia. Their initiative is an example of participation by the minority that fight most political battles in democracies.

The second factor behind deeper engagement is political interest: high-status individuals are more likely to be engaged with politics because they have the motive as well as the means to become involved. No longer as preoccupied with the challenges of daily life, they can take satisfaction from engagement in collective activity (Inglehart and Welzel, 2010). The wealthy also have more time to follow trends in the quality of public life, and are more likely to be able to see how politics can impact their assets and prospects.

As for political spectators, their characteristics are harder to pin down, and their role has changed with the increased availability of information. The internet and the rise of social media have made it possible for people to gather political information at a level of detail that was impossible even a generation ago, and have made it easier to recirculate that information through clicktivism. If watching without necessarily speaking is a form of participation, then political spectating may now be a leading and influential form of participation. In an age of spectatorship, suggests Green (2010), the disciplinary gaze of the people – their eyes, rather than their voice – has become the source of their power.

Finally, what about the apathetics: the people who do not participate at all? Because participation in most democracies is an option rather than a requirement (however, see discussion about mandatory voting in Chapter 14), and because inequalities in participation are deeply rooted in differences in resources and interest, levels of engagement are unlikely ever to be equal; the active minority will remain sociologically unrepresentative of the passive majority. As to what exactly discourages participation, the explanation for some people is a

cost-benefit calculation that they have nothing to gain from taking part. For others it is a problem of **political exclusion**: some apathetics effectively exclude themselves – or, sometimes, are excluded – because they feel marginalized or alienated, or believe that their involvement will make little or no difference, or see government as a set of institutions dominated by elites, or are simply not interested in politics.

Political exclusion: The phenomenon by which some – such as the poor, minorities, and the unemployed – are discouraged from taking part in collective decision-making because of their marginal position in society.

Having asked *who* participates in politics, it is also worth briefly asking *why* they take part. Rational choice theorists (see *Using Theory 13*) suggest that voting is an irrational act, given the amount of time and effort that it takes to remain engaged and informed, and the minimal chance that participating will actually make any difference (Downs, 1957). This is the **paradox of participation**. Of course, though, if everyone thought this way then no one would participate and democracy would cease to function. As we saw earlier in the chapter, there are several more focused reasons for making the effort to participate, all of which will exert different levels of influence on people according to their perspectives on government and politics.

Paradox of participation: The idea that voting is an irrational act given the time and effort involved and the minimal chance that any one voter can make a difference.

Looking just at the case of participation by women, significant recent trends are apparent within democracies, reinforced in some countries – as we saw in Chapter 9 – by policies aimed at increasing the proportion of women legislators. Yet, in spite of the removal in most countries of formal barriers to women's participation in politics, subtle barriers remain; this applies not only to political engagement and participation, but also to election or appointment to political office (Paxton et al., 2021). Part of the explanation lies in the relatively late arrival of women to politics: New Zealand may have been the first country in the world to allow women to vote (in 1893), and Finland may have been the first country to have a woman elected to its national legislature (in 1907), but it was only after World War II that women's suffrage spread more widely, in tandem with the creation of new states.

Taking the single indicator of voter turnout, data generated by the World Values Survey (WVS) (see Solijonov, 2016) found in 2010–14 that, in 59 countries surveyed, men and women turned out in similar numbers: 61 per cent of men and 59 per cent of women claimed that they 'always' voted, while 22 and 23 per cent respectively claimed that they 'sometimes' voted. When broken down by country, though, significant differences appeared: women were more active in about one-third of the countries surveyed (including Russia, New Zealand, Brazil, South Africa, and Sweden), while men were more active in the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia (notably Pakistan, Egypt, Nigeria, and Japan).

Having said this, though, the WVS data are based on opinion polls, and hard data on gender turnout is difficult to find for the simple reason that it is rarely collected. Among the few countries with such data over an extended period of time are the United States and India. In the former, the gender gap in presidential elections has been reversed, growing steadily in favour of women, who are now regularly outvoting men by about 3–4 percentage points (see Figure 13.4). There are several possible reasons for this: social norms are changing, for example, as more active younger women supersede their less-involved mothers

USING THEORY 13

Rational choice theory: An approach to the study of politics and government based on the idea that individuals work to maximize their benefits and minimize their costs.

RATIONAL CHOICE

Political participation is driven by cost-benefit calculations that are similar to those that each of us makes about almost any kind of activity. One approach to better understanding these calculations is rational choice theory. This assumes, as Geddes (2003) puts it, that people 'are rational in the sense that, given goals and alternative strategies from which to choose, they will select the alternatives that maximize their chances of achieving their goals'. We will each instinctively make decisions that we think of as logical and prudent, and even where actions might not appear to be selfish – as when people help other people, or countries help other countries – it can still be argued that the act of helping generates its own benefits, which may be something as simple as achieving satisfaction.

The rational choice approach has been used to better understand voters in democracies, finding that even if it is rational for them to vote, it is not necessarily rational for them to invest the time and effort needed to become informed voters. One of the effects of this is that wealthy and powerful people and institutions come to exert a disproportionate influence over the electoral process. A solution proposed by Somin (2016) – for the United States, at least – involves decentralizing and limiting government, on the basis that people make better decisions when they have stronger incentives to acquire relevant information and to use it wisely.

Paradoxically, the value of the rational choice approach extends to helping explain the reasoning behind what might, at first, appear to be irrational behaviour. In 2016, for example, many British voters supported Brexit and many American voters supported Donald Trump, even though numerous political studies warned that they would often be acting against their own best interests. The two events led to an avalanche of political analysis that tied the two events to shared concerns about immigration, globalization, loss of national sovereignty, distaste for political elites, and nostalgia for the (largely imagined) 'good old days'. Even if the choices of Brexit and Trump surprised many of the pundits, subsequent research found that both choices were a rational form of protest against the status quo.

One problem with rational choice theory is that it is based on a universal model of human behaviour that leaves it with limited relevance in understanding variations across countries. Just as individual goals are taken for granted, so too should be the different national and cultural settings which determine the choices available to individuals and within which they pursue their strategies. What might seem rational for one person, or community, or society, or country, might not seem rational for another. For voters in democracies, for example, it may seem irrational for Russian voters to keep on returning Vladimir Putin to office (helped, of course, by electoral irregularities – see later in this chapter). However, and at least before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, many Russian voters (particularly younger ones) defined his administration as being in their best interests, in part because he represented their best hope of avoiding a return to the repression of the Soviet era (Troianovski, 2018).

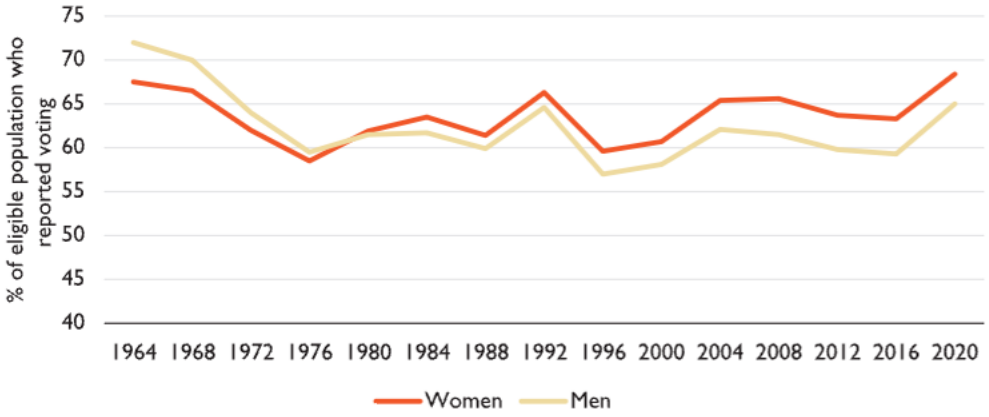


Figure 13.4 Voter turnout by gender in the United States
Source: Based on United States Census Bureau (2024). Presidential election years only.

and grandmothers, and women's issues (such as abortion, gender rights, childcare, and equal pay) have achieved a new prominence on the political agenda (Wolbrecht and Corder, 2020). While turnout in India has been less studied, Figure 13.5 shows that the gap between men and women has now closed, for similar reasons to those found in the United States.

Another country with extended data on turnout for men and women is India, where the gap was bigger than that found in the United States (running as high as a 23-point difference in the 1960s and 1970s) but which has since narrowed. In fact, in 2019, women overtook men for the first time, by 0.17 percentage points. At least part of the explanation has been a deliberate effort by the governing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to appeal to women voters. It has fielded more women candidates at elections, appointed more women to ministerial positions in government, introduced quotas for women in the party, and pursued welfare policies that have appealed to women in rural areas and living in poverty (Mehta, 2022).

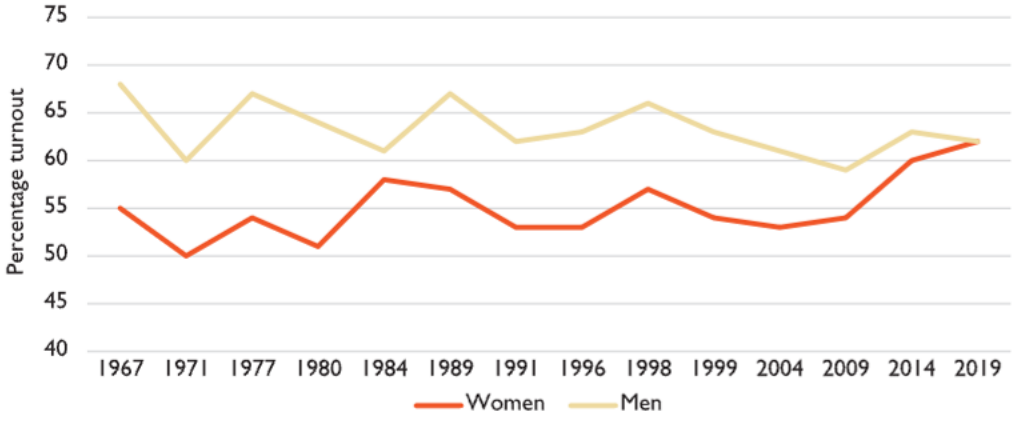


Figure 13.5 Voter turnout by gender in India
Source: Based on data in Election Commission of India (2024).

VOTING

In democratic regimes, voting is the single act of participation from which almost all other political activities flow, because it is how governments are most immediately chosen, formed, and held accountable. It is also the most equitable form of participation, because every citizen is counted equally (in theory, at least; see Chapter 14 for some of the arithmetical problems with elections, and the effects of electoral fraud). It is also a relatively easy form of participation, and only makes periodic demands of citizens, who are briefly active during election seasons and can spend the time in between passively spectating. It is more complicated in authoritarian regimes, because fraud and intimidation mean that voting is not so much an expression of popular will as a means of controlling voters and of co-opting both the elite and the opposition.

In terms of what voting tells us about the dynamics of participation, the key question to be asked is how voters make their choices. There are several possible answers, with sociological and psychological influences playing different roles in different places at different times. Most of what we know about voting habits revolves around four main factors, summarized in Figure 13.6.

Social class: A hierarchical division of society based on measures such as wealth, education, occupation, and status.

The first of these is **social class**, which was long a key factor in voter choice throughout the democratic world: the working class tended to support parties of the left, while the middle class leaned towards parties of the centre or the right. At one time it was thought that class voting was in decline, particularly in those Western European countries where it was once highest. It continues, however, although with notable changes, including a trend among many working-class voters to support parties of the far right. A study of European voters by Oesch and Rennwald (2018) finds that those parties are now competing for votes both with small business owners who mainly vote centre-right, and with workers who agree with the hostility of the far right towards immigration and globalization.

The second factor influencing voter choice is the state of the economy, as colourfully illustrated during the 1992 presidential election in the United States, when a sign was hung in the headquarters of the Bill Clinton campaign that was designed to keep workers on message. Written by campaign strategist

Factor	*Features*
Social class	The class base of political parties has been eroding as the structure of economies has changed.
The economy	Nearly always important, but not always decisive.
Issues	Issues such as crime and security are important, but this presupposes that voters are aware of – and have opinions on – such issues.
Religion	Still a factor in many countries, although it has been declining with the rise of secularization.

Figure 13.6 Influences on voter choice

Discord

James Carville, the sign had just three items: 'change vs. more of the same', 'the economy, stupid', and 'don't forget health care'. The second of these three soon became a slogan for the Clinton campaign and has since become part of the political lexicon more generally, appearing in multiple variations such as 'it's the deficit, stupid' and 'it's the voters, stupid'.

There is a large body of evidence in support of the idea of **economic voting**, sustained over time and supported by comparative studies not just in Europe and North America, but also in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. The research, conclude Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier (2019), shows that 'government loses votes when the economy stumbles … and gains votes when the economy prospers', and that 'these effects tend to be persistent, pervasive, and strong'. This is illustrated by the case of Greece, which has undergone major economic problems in recent years. Syriza is a progressive left coalition party that was created in 2004, but won only 13 seats (out of 200) in the 2008 general election. It became the second biggest party following two elections held within a month of each other in 2012 as Greece suffered under austerity policies implemented as part of a response to its economic problems. It then won two elections held in 2015, at one point holding nearly half the seats in the Greek parliament, and its leader Alexis Tsipras became prime minister. In the face of continuing economic problems, though, Syriza was heavily defeated in the 2019 and 2023 elections, the centre-right New Democracy Party more than doubling its representation to win a majority. The result, conclude Goulas et al. (2019), confirmed once again that incumbents are supported by voters in good times and punished by them in bad times.

Economic voting: The theory that there is a strong correlation between voter choice and the state of the economy.

The actions of poorer voters – whether they live in wealthy or poor countries – set up an interesting paradox. Many studies have shown that a significant number often vote for parties that do not appear to stand for their material interests, and instead support parties that represent the interests of the wealthy. Huber and Stanig (2009) several years ago pointed out, for example, that large numbers of poorer voters in wealthy democracies were supporting parties that were opposed to the kind of higher taxes and redistributive policies from which such voters would benefit. This was reflected in the 2016 victory of Donald Trump in the United States: he won much of his support from voters who felt marginalized by political and economic elites, and who backed his promises to control immigration and create new jobs. Yet most of those that Trump appointed to his administration were, like him, wealthy individuals from corporate backgrounds, and many of his policies were designed to reduce the tax burden on the wealthy and corporations, and to set up trade barriers that had the effect of raising prices on imports and undercutting exports.

An economic incentive of a different kind is **vote buying**. Although this may sound like a problem mainly for poorer or more corrupt societies, it is a widespread phenomenon. Governments legally and routinely 'buy' the votes of other governments, for example, in meetings of international organizations (Lockwood, 2013), and almost any instance where elected representatives can point to a new factory, school, or military facility that was brought to their district through their efforts might be defined as vote buying. Schaffer (2007)

Vote buying: The provision by parties and candidates of goods and benefits to voters in return for their support at elections.

points to the use of cash and commodities in poorer societies (he lists everything from cigarettes to watches, coffins, haircuts, bags of rice, birthday cakes, and TV sets), but also notes that services can be used to buy votes. (See also the discussion about clientelism later in this chapter.)

In their book *Democracy for Sale*, Aspinall and Berenshcot (2019) look at the case of Indonesia (a flawed democracy), arguing that despite the country's recent moves towards democracy, problems such as vote buying, influence peddling, and skimming money from government projects are all part of the everyday practice of politics. 'At every level,' they note, 'formal political institutions are shadowed by informal, personalized networks through which material benefits and favours flow', with politicians often winning power by distributing small-scale projects, cash, or other goods to voters or community groups.

Brazil (another flawed democracy) provides an example of vote buying within the government. A major scandal broke there in 2005, with charges that the ruling Workers' Party had paid several Congressional deputies a monthly stipend in return for their support for legislation supported by the party. Known as the Mensalão (big monthly stipend) scandal, it threatened to bring down the government of President Lula da Silva (in office 2003–10). Although Lula won election to a second term in 2006, 25 of the 38 defendants in the resulting court case were found guilty of a variety of charges. Later, in 2018–19, Lula served time in prison after having been found guilty of money laundering and receiving bribes. This was not enough, though, to prevent him from being returned to a third term in office in 2023.

The third major influence on voter choice is issues: the broad public questions that surround topics such as employment, crime, security, the environment, education, public spending, and taxation. In reality, there are several barriers to cross before someone can be described as an **issue voter**: they must be aware of the issue, have an opinion on the issue, believe that parties differ on the issue, and vote for the party closest to their position. The earliest studies of voter choices concluded that only a minority crossed all these barriers, while later studies suggested that voting on the basis of specific policies (and also broader ideologies) had increased. It also needs to be emphasized that context is important: a study of Argentina (Lupu et al. 2019), for example, argues that because poverty and corruption may be bigger problems in developing democracies than in advanced ones, and attachment to political parties may be weaker, voters may place more emphasis on issue voting.

Issue voter: A voter who makes choices at elections based on the policies that most interest them, rather than solely on the basis of sociological or demographic factors.

In one of the earliest comparative studies of issue voting, Franklin (1992) concluded from a review of 17 democracies that the rise of issue voting matched more or less precisely a decline in voting on the basis of social position. Lewis-Beck et al. (2008) later reached a similar conclusion for the United States, where comparable information has been available for the longest period: with improved levels of education among voters, they found, there was 'more frequent issue voting, greater overall clarity in the structure of mass issue attitudes, and enhanced salience of ideological themes within the public's political thinking'. Questions remain, though, about the quality of voter knowledge (see next section), a problem that has been made worse – as

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we saw in Chapter 12 – by the twin effects of the echo chamber and disinformation. Many people are aware of issues and have an opinion on them, but how many know much about the details of those issues, and about their causes and effects?

The final key influence on voter choice is religion. As long ago as the 1960s, Rose and Urwin (1969) concluded that 'religious divisions, not class, are the main social bases of parties in the Western world today'. More recently, Esmer and Pettersson (2007) found that 'religiosity still significantly shapes electoral choice in most European countries' (the exceptions include Scandinavia and Britain). In some parts of the world, such as Nigeria (Nwankwo, 2019) and the United States (Newport, 2020), the influence of religion is actually growing. In Brazil, the weakness of the party system has resulted in religious leaders driving the kind of cultural divisions often driven by parties in established democracies, leveraging politics to promote their own theological goals and the interests of their religious groups (Smith, 2019). Religion is not a single variable, however, and can be studied from three main angles:

- We can distinguish broadly between religious and secular voters, the former tending to vote for the right and the latter for the left.
- We can separate voters by specific denominations. Catholics, for example, might be more conservative than Jewish voters in some countries.
- We can separate voters by the importance of religion in their lives; religion will be more of a factor in the choices of voters with the strongest religious beliefs, who will also have higher participation rates.

Just as industrial change has contributed to the decline of class voting, so **secularization** might be expected to lead to a fall in religious voting; as societies modernize, so they naturally become more secular. Certainly, religious belief continues to decline in many democracies, not least in Europe (and increasingly in the United States). Yet it is difficult to find evidence that religious voting has declined to the same extent as class voting. Overall, the religious base of electoral behaviour seems to have considerable staying power.

Secularization: The declining space occupied by religion in political, social, and personal life.

PUBLIC OPINION

The depth and breadth of political participation is closely tied to **public opinion**, particularly if we agree that participation can be passive as well as active. When people talk or even simply think about the issues of the day, they are taking part in the political process. Little wonder, then, that political leaders engage in a continuous debate on what 'the people' think about particular issues, and little wonder that they watch opinion polls so closely (even if they routinely deny this, often claiming that the only poll that matters is the vote on Election Day). A case can even be made that public opinion is a more powerful influence on political decisions than elections, given that public opinion is measured continuously and on specific issues, while elections only happen once in a while. In this sense, what applied during the French Revolution is still relevant today:

Public opinion: The range of views held on an issue of public concern by the members of an affected community.

Discord
Francisco (# -general, Discu

> Public opinion was a power that manifested itself always and everywhere without being represented or instituted in any particular place. Hence it became the essential manifestation of the people as an active and permanent presence. (Rosanvallon, 2008)

Opinion poll: A series of questions asked in a standard way of a systematic sample of the population in order to gauge public opinion.

Sample survey: Similar to an opinion poll but involving a more detailed questionnaire. Such surveys are often commissioned by governments or academic researchers.

In terms of how public opinion is measured, there are several options available, including **opinion polls** and **sample surveys**. Although the public itself remains sceptical of polls and surveys, their accuracy is well attested, at least in predicting election outcomes in countries where pollsters know how to interpret the numbers. In modern presidential elections in the United States, for example, the difference between the number of votes projected for the eventual winner and the final result has rarely been more than 3 per cent. One pollster, Nate Silver of the *New York Times*, was even able to correctly predict the winner in 49 out of 50 states in 2008, and in all 50 states in 2012. Even though polls were criticized for 'getting it wrong' in 2016 when most projected that Hillary Clinton would beat Donald Trump, they were actually not far off: they had her winning the popular vote by 3.2 per cent, and, in the event, she won it by 2.1 per cent. In 2020, most polls correctly predicted that Joe Biden would win with 51 per cent of the popular vote.

However, in an era of declining turnout at elections, changes in technology, voters making up their mind at the last minute, and falling response rates to surveys, pollsters face growing challenges. In the 2015 British general election, for example, they significantly under-estimated the number of seats that the governing Conservatives would win. This was driven in part by a reluctance on the part of supporters of the governing Conservative party to admit their preference, and in part by the tendency of supporters of the opposition Labour party to exaggerate their likelihood of voting. Another explanation distinguished between values and choices: voters might not have liked the values of a particular political party (such as the Conservatives), but they still voted for it because they believed that it would govern more effectively than the alternatives, not least on the economy (Booth, 2015).

Counter-intuitive though it may be, a group of 1,000 people carefully selected for an opinion poll can accurately represent the wider population. The key phrase here is 'carefully selected'. The procedure must be systematic, and the sample must be compared with known figures for the population, with adjustments (known as 'weighting') for any discrepancies. Weighting is particularly important when the sample is self-selected, as with people who agree to take part in polls conducted through social media. Weighted or not, some self-selected samples, such as the small minority of voters who contact their representative about their pet topic, should not be regarded as a valid basis for estimating public opinion – at least not when public opinion is equated with the whole adult population.

Even when a sample is chosen systematically, it would be wrong to overstate the reliability of opinion polls in measuring the opinions of individual respondents. Polls are usually commissioned by political parties or mass media, not by the ordinary people who answer the questions. As a result, people may never have thought about a topic before they are invited to answer questions on it,

may give an opinion when they have none, or may agree to a statement because it is the easiest thing to do ('yea-saying') or because it is socially acceptable. Certainly, one danger of opinion polls is that they help to construct the public opinions they claim to be measuring.

One of the key problems with knowing how to measure or to use public opinion relates to how much people actually know (see *Exploring Problems 13*). Generally speaking, most people are selectively informed, the degree of their knowledge and understanding declining as they move away from issues about which they care. The events surrounding the 2016 British referendum on continued membership of the European Union are a good example. It was suggested at first that the wording of the referendum should be 'Do you think the UK should be a member of the European Union?'. This was rejected, though, when the UK Electoral Commission warned that enough Britons did not know that the UK was *already* a member as to create confusion and a flawed result (McCormick, 2014). The question eventually asked was 'Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?' Even then, there were multiple problems with the question, not least its reduction of a complex issue to a binary choice.

The debate surrounding the referendum often made matters worse as numerous claims were made by the two sides in the campaign (Remainers and Leavers) that were either simply and verifiably wrong, or based on a faulty understanding of the implications of remaining or leaving. No one – not even political experts or economists – knew for certain what would happen if Britain decided to leave, many of the effects on jobs and the economy were unanticipated, and Britain's government found itself saddled with unexpectedly complex negotiations on a wide range of issues. As a result, the true implications of the outcome of the vote continue to be worked out even today.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

When Hong Kong reverted from British to Chinese rule in 1997, part of the agreement was that its democracy would be preserved in an arrangement known as 'one country, two systems'. Despite many doubts about how well China would live up to its promises, Hong Kong went on to rank as one of the most economically and politically dynamic communities in the world. This began to change in 2012, when the Chinese Communist Party under the leadership of General Secretary (and President) Xi Jinping began making changes to electoral laws in Hong Kong. These sparked the Umbrella Revolution of 2014, when protestors took to the streets, using umbrellas to deflect pepper spray and tear gas used by the police. Younger citizens of the province, many of whom had previously been apolitical, were galvanized into political action, often directly resisting a violent police crackdown. More protests followed in 2019–20 over plans (since halted) to allow extradition of criminal suspects to China, threatening judicial independence and the rights of dissidents.

EXPLORING PROBLEMS 13

HOW CAN WE MEET THE CHALLENGE OF THE MIS/UNINFORMED CITIZEN?

The quality and quantity of political participation are both driven in part by the knowledge of citizens: those who keep up with public affairs and have well-formed opinions are more likely to participate than those who do not. However, there is no guarantee even that those who participate really know as much as they think they know about the issues at stake. In reality, most people are well informed on some issues, poorly informed on others, and selectively informed overall. This raises the troubling problem of the uninformed citizen, and of how low levels of knowledge impact government and politics.

This is far from a new concern:

- In *The Republic*, the Greek philosopher Plato (c. 425–347 BCE) argued that government was best conducted by knowledgeable experts, free from the influence of the uninformed majority.
- In *Leviathan* (published in 1651), Thomas Hobbes suggested that the role of the public should not extend much further than the formation of government.
- Machiavelli, Hume, and Hegel conceded that while the involvement of citizens in government was important, it was no more than a necessary evil.
- The nineteenth-century British philosopher John Stuart Mill (1861) regarded public opinion as representing the views of a 'collective mediocrity', and favoured a weighted system that gave more votes to university graduates on the grounds that they were more politically competent.

Despite all these doubts, there are some political scientists who argue that voters can use shortcuts such as party labels, expert endorsements, and campaign cues to help them make more informed choices. Downs (1957) suggested that voters could infer the policy stance of candidates in an election from their party affiliations, while Popkin (1994) argued that most of the information voters learned about politics was picked up as a by-product of activities pursued as a part of daily life; the media helped, he argued, by explaining the actions of political leaders and parties, and the relevance of those actions for voters, while campaigns helped to clarify the issues. For Lupia (1994), the use of shortcuts could in certain cases allow badly informed voters to emulate the behaviour of relatively well-informed voters.

Notice, though, that these opinions all pre-date the arrival of social media, and the concerns that have since arisen about false news, disinformation, conspiracy theories, artificial intelligence, and the post-truth world discussed in Chapter 12. In a nutshell, and with just a few exceptions (such as felons in some countries), all the registered adult citizens of democratic regimes (and most authoritarian regimes as well) are allowed to vote, but most have only a patchy knowledge of the issues on which they are voting.

- Is this a problem?
- If it is, then how is it best resolved?
- Should we rely on better public education, better and more responsive government, easier participation, or some other means?
- Do well-informed citizens ultimately offset the effects of poorly informed citizens, or do the weaknesses of the latter cancel the strengths of the former?

The case of Hong Kong illustrates both the potential and the limitations of mass mobilization against an authoritarian regime bent on exerting more control over its citizens. It also contradicts the popular assumption that political participation is an empty concept in non-democratic settings. After all, the nature of authoritarian regimes is that they seek to control popular activity in order to ensure their own survival and retention of power. Despite its importance, understanding participation in authoritarian systems is not easy, mainly because of the difficulties involved in measuring public opinion in such regimes:

- In poorer countries where most people are focused on daily survival, and both education and communication are limited, there may be no such thing as public opinion on anything beyond local matters.
- Sample surveys are hard to run when it is less clear how to define a representative sample.
- Since urban elites are the easiest to reach, they will be the people most often surveyed, but their interests (and levels of participation or engagement) will differ from those of the rural poor.
- People may be unfamiliar and uncomfortable with the polling techniques used in democracies, and might be suspicious of pollsters, making them unwilling to express their true feelings.

Despite this, the evidence suggests that some of the patterns of participation found in authoritarian regimes are not that different from those found in democratic regime: older people are more likely to vote, for example, while younger people are more likely to participate in less conventional ways, and more educated citizens are more likely to participate generally. Having said that, participation in authoritarian regimes is often subject to an implicit dialogue as opponents and activists test the boundaries of the acceptable: see *Spotlight 13* on Russia at the end of this chapter. Authoritarian rulers may allow free speech in those areas such as local politics which do not directly threaten the central leadership. They may also permit the expression of opinion on the internet even as they censor television broadcasts. They may even come to realize that responding to popular pressure on non-sensitive issues can limit dissent and enhance political stability. They will only allow this to go so far, however.

Participation in authoritarian regimes plays quite different roles – and is subject to quite different influences – from those found in democracies, driven mainly by the desire of leaders and elites to keep their hold on power (see Figure 13.7). In contrast to the bottom-up participation found in democracies, participation in authoritarian regimes is managed from above. For example, voting in democratic regimes is an autonomous endeavour; voters will have their opinions formed by multiple influences, but it is still ultimately up to them how to vote. In authoritarian regimes, voters are more likely to have their choices restricted and manipulated, whether through a limit on the number of parties running, through coercion, through the use of illegal means to shape election outcomes, or through the more blatant trading of favours for support.

Another notable difference between democratic and authoritarian regimes is that while there is a high degree of online participation in democracies, made

Factor	Features
Control	A means by which a governing regime can detect and measure dissatisfaction, and can manage and marginalize opponents.
Patronage	A means for creating and managing patron-client relationships, providing favours in return for support.
Political expression	Participation as an expression of support for the regime, or non-participation as an expression of opposition.
Mobilizationa	A means by which a governing regime can give the impression of popular support.

Figure 13.7 Participation in authoritarian regimes

possible by widespread access to the internet, fewer people have access in many authoritarian regimes, and the internet is subject to more censorship. We saw the differences in Figure 12.3 in urban and rural access to the internet around the world, but a different way of expressing those differences lies in comparing use of the internet in our Spotlight countries (see Figure 13.8). Globally, only about 63 per cent of people used the internet in 2017–21. The numbers in most democracies, however, were much higher than in most authoritarian regimes, with the notable exceptions of Saudi Arabia and Russia, where access is as widespread as in democracies. In Latin America, only 76 per cent of people use the internet, a figure that falls to 36 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa.

Behind the scenes, a common technique for channelling, but also controlling, participation in authoritarian regimes is patronage of the kind we saw in Chapter 5. Although there is some confusion over how it is different from the kind of vote buying discussed earlier in this chapter, or the corporatism discussed in Chapter 16, it can be broadly summarized as a quid pro quo: 'You give me your support in return for which I will provide you with favours. I will no

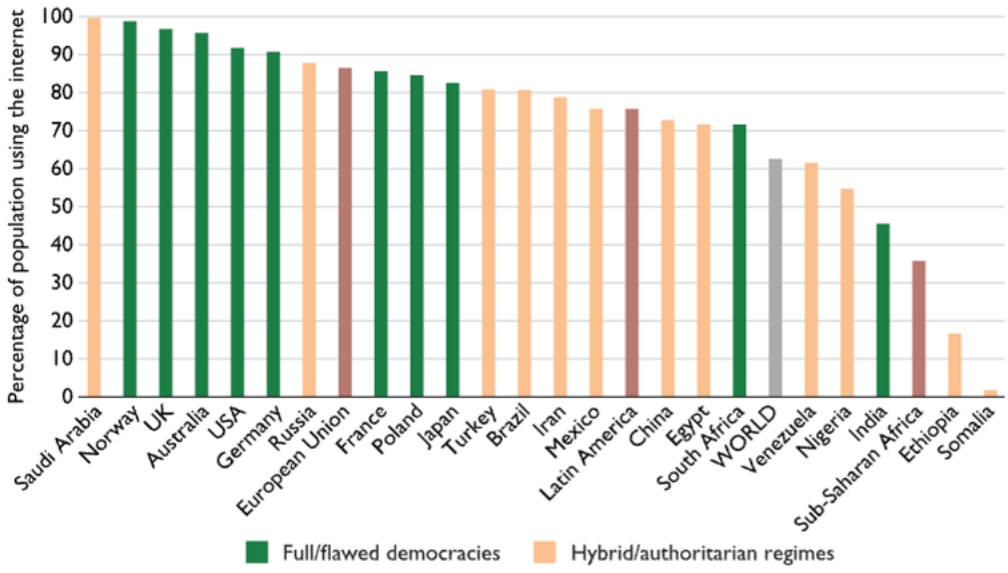


Figure 13.8 Internet use: the democratic–authoritarian divide

Source: Based on World Bank (2024). Data are for 2017–21.

longer be a public servant but will instead be the servant of a privileged group.' While this dynamic is found in democratic as well as authoritarian regimes, it is looked at more unfavourably in the former, while being used more often and often more blatantly in the latter. A related term is **clientelism** (sometimes described as electoral clientelism), which is a form of patronage linked specifically to electoral support.

Clientelism: The provision of material goods or public resources in return for electoral support.

An example of clientelism is given by Kramon (2018) when – in his book titled *Money for Votes* – he relates the story of a campaign event in 2013 in Kenya at which a candidate named Ferdinand Waititu was secretly videotaped making a speech in which he promised that he would bring jobs and improved food security for voters in his district, but then stepped over the line by personally distributing cash to members of the audience. Although he lost the election, Waititu – popularly known as 'Baba Yao', or 'Their Father' – was elected to the Kenyan parliament two years later, and was then elected as a county governor. Even his impeachment on corruption charges in 2020 was not enough to discourage him from continuing to contest elections.

Another concept that raises questions about the point at which public service becomes privileged service is the **patron–client relationship**. Most examples of such relationships are based on traditional relationships (perhaps ethnic or religious) and fuelled by exchanges between a high-status patron and clients of lower status. The colloquial phrase 'big man/small boy' conveys the nature of the interaction: patrons are landlords, employers, party bosses, government ministers, ethnic leaders, religious leaders, or anyone with control over resources, around whom clients – lacking resources of their own – gather for protection and security.

Patron–client relationship: An informal hierarchical relationship between political patrons and their clients, based on favours in return for support.

Although patron–client relationships are found in all political systems, including democracies, they are of greater political significance in authoritarian regimes. Particularly in low-income countries, and in unequal societies with weak governing institutions, personal networks of patrons and clients can be the main channel of contact between governs and the governed, and are often the central organizing structure of politics itself. Access to government is controlled and limited, and based on personal exchanges rather than being channelled through a political party or a shared political outlook. Despite their informality, these networks underpin, and often overwhelm, more formal channels of participation such as political parties.

Both patronage and clientelism have been described by Ruiz de Elvira et al. (2019) as 'central features' of the political systems and societies of the Middle East, leading to the creation of 'networks of dependency' in which patrons and clients have a reciprocal and mutually binding relationship. Clientelism is also common in Latin America, in flawed democracies such as Peru, as well as hybrid and authoritarian regimes such as Bolivia, Guatemala, Honduras, and Venezuela. By distributing gifts, argues Muñoz (2019), 'politicians buy the participation of poor voters at campaign events'. This helps these politicians improvise political organizations, persuade poor voters of the desirability of candidates, and signal electoral viability to voters, with the dynamics of campaigns ultimately shaping the results of elections.

Mobilized participation: Elite-controlled involvement in politics designed to express popular support for the regime.

Another phenomenon often found in authoritarian regimes is **mobilized participation**. In contrast to the autonomous participation found in democracies, where mass events such as party conferences are organized for maximum media coverage, mobilized participation is managed, manipulated, sometimes rewarded, and occasionally obligatory. Although the term was originally used mainly in the context of communist countries, and still reappears in discussions about participation in China, it can be more widely applied to any instance where people may be encouraged to take part in political events or rallies in return for rewards such as food, entertainment, or cash payments.

Many authoritarian regimes in sub-Saharan Africa use mobilized participation to give the impression of enthusiastic support for the regime. A case in point is Zimbabwe, where the ruling ZANU-PF party (in power without a break since 1980) will regularly organize rallies in sports stadiums, bussing in large numbers of 'supporters' dressed in clothing bearing the party colours (red, black, green, and yellow) and pictures of the president, and encourage them to dance and clap and sing and generally give the impression that they are having a wonderful time and could not hope for a better leader or government. North Korea also has finetuned the process, staging massive military parades or public displays of enthusiasm at which Kim Jong Un is always the star of the show. Smaller events are also organized at which Kim is shown talking to a happy and engaged group of soldiers, or workers, or scientists, while members of the group carefully take notes as though not wishing to miss a word of his imparted wisdom.

STR / Stringer

North Korea's pre-eminence in mobilized participation is reflected in this image of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un waving to people after a military parade in Pyongyang marking the birthday of his predecessor and grandfather Kim Il-Sung.

One factor impacting participation, and where democratic and authoritarian regimes mainly part company, is the potential for **political violence**. At its worst, it can involve terrorism, assassination, and genocide, but it can also describe situations in which opposing groups or individuals allow their differences to spill over into violent confrontation. Voters in democracies might sometimes have to deal with intimidation, but they rarely have to put their lives on the line (as they once often did) in order to support campaigns or cast a ballot. In authoritarian regimes, by contrast, a dangerous combination of intimidation by the regime and domestic social or ethnic divisions often means a greater likelihood of political violence, much of it organized. This is particularly true during election seasons, when campaigns can be marred by direct and short-term conflict among competing groups, with its primary impact being on voters.

Political violence Violence perpetrated by people or governments for political ends.

The problem of political violence has been particularly serious in Nigeria, a hybrid regime with a large, divided, and volatile society where voters identify above all with their ethnicity or religion, where parties have routinely reflected ethnic divisions, and where ethnic, religious, and community tensions have often sparked violence. Estimates of the number of deaths vary by source, and a distinction needs to be made between domestic political violence and violence resulting from the ongoing activities of the insurgency by Islamist extremists of Boko Haram. Even so, two interest groups – Human Rights Watch and the International Society for Civil Liberties and the Rule of Law – suggest that between 1999 and 2010, the number of Nigerians killed in such violence ranged between 11,000 and 13,500 (quoted in Campbell, 2013). Between 2011 and 2023, another 73,000 people were reportedly killed, about half of them as a result of Boko Haram activities (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023).

In eastern Africa, meanwhile, Kenya (another hybrid) has recently been a cause for concern because of outbreaks of political violence during elections. Like Nigeria, it is divided ethnically, and there have long been tensions between its two major groups, the Kikuyu of central Kenya and the Luo of western Kenya. In the 1960s, Kenya was governed by nationalist leader Jomo Kenyatta, a Kikuyu, and one of his main adversaries was Oginga Odinga, a Luo. Their two sons – Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga – played a key role in the 2007 elections, the former as a party organizer and the latter as a candidate for the presidency. Odinga lost the election, which was surrounded by unprecedented levels of civil unrest that resulted in the deaths of more than 1,300 Kenyans. Kenyatta and Odinga competed against each other in the 2013 and 2017 elections, both of which were won by Kenyatta against a background of fraud charges and more political violence.

If we agree with the cost–benefit analysis of political participation, then we can reasonably assume that the greater the costs of taking part in political activities, the less likely it is that people will take part. On this basis, it would be reasonable to assume that most critics and opponents of an authoritarian regime, except for the bravest, would be likely to keep their heads down. However, Aytaç and Stokes (2019) suggest that the greater the response of an authoritarian regime to opposition, the more likelihood that citizens will step up to be heard. Iran stands as an example, with repeated demonstrations and strikes in 2018–23

against economic problems, poverty, corruption, the government response to the Covid-19 pandemic, water and power shortages, and government policy on women's dress. All were met with violent responses by the Iranian regime, with as many as 1,500 people thought to have been killed in a 2019–20 cycle alone. Despite this, the protests continued, often spreading to multiple cities and engaging multiple groups of people, including workers, teachers, students, retirees, and health-care workers.

In summary, then, while it might be logical to assume that political participation in authoritarian regimes will be more careful, restrained, and restricted than is the case in democracies, the logic does not always work. There are many similarities in the channels available for participation, the effects of authoritarian rule often being less telling than the effects of poverty or the urban–rural divide as a way of explaining the differences in how they are used. There is also much overlap in the way that democratic and authoritarian regimes encourage and limit participation, the main difference being that those limits are subject to tighter political and legal scrutiny in democracies than in authoritarian regimes. At the end of the day, though, the desire of ordinary people to express themselves varies little from one political system to another.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Is political participation rational?
- Must political participation always be active, or can it also be passive?
- What differences – if any – would we see if men and women participated equally in politics, and had equal access to positions of power?
- Social class, the economy, issues, or religion; which of these, in your experience, is the most compelling explanation of voter choice?
- What do you think of the argument that people can use information short cuts to help them make informed decisions?
- What is the difference between clientelism, patronage, and vote buying?

KEY CONCEPTS

- Clicktivism
- Clientelism
- Conventional participation
- Digital activism
- Economic voting
- Issue voter
- Mobilized participation
- Opinion poll
- Paradox of participation
- Patron–client relationship
- Political exclusion
- Political participation
- Political violence
- Public opinion
- Rational choice theory
- Sample survey
- Secularization
- Social class
- Unconventional participation
- Vote buying

FURTHER READING

Aytaç, S. Erdem, and Susan C. Stokes (2019) *Why Bother? Rethinking Participation in Elections and Protests* (Cambridge University Press). A comparative study of participation, arguing that increases in the cost of participation – including voter suppression – sometimes lead to more participation, not less.

Dalton, Russell J. (2020) *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, 7th edn (SAGE). This comparative text provides a wide-ranging review of political attitudes and behaviour in democracies.

Gethin, Amory, Clara Martínez-Toledano, and Thomas Piketty (eds) (2021) *Political Cleavages and Social Inequalities* (Harvard University Press). An edited collection of chapters using data gathered in 50 countries to look at the links between voter preferences and characteristics, such as income, education, wealth, occupation, religion, ethnicity, age, and gender.

Giugni, Marco, and Maria Grasso (eds) (2022) *The Oxford Handbook of Political Participation* (Oxford University Press). An edited collection of studies of political participation, including chapters on types, contexts, drivers, and outcomes of participation.

Lupia, Arthur (2016) *Uninformed: Why People Seem to Know So Little About Politics and What We Can Do About It* (Oxford University Press). An assessment of the causes of – and possible responses to – the uninformed citizen by a leading scholar on the topic.

Paxton, Pamela, Melanie M. Hughes, and Tiffany D. Barnes (2021) *Women, Politics, and Power: A Global Perspective*, 4th edn (Rowman & Littlefield). A survey of the changing place of women in politics, including analysis of the development of women's rights, and chapters on different regions of the world.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Visit **bloomsbury.pub/comparative-government-and-politics-13e** to access additional materials to support teaching and learning.

SPOTLIGHT 13
RUSSIAN FEDERATION

PROFILE

Russia has undergone dramatic changes in recent decades. For nearly 70 years, it was the dominant partner in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), a state that most Westerners feared and misunderstood. The USSR collapsed in 1991, but while the new Russia seemed to be on the road to democracy, reversals began in 2000 with the election of Vladimir Putin as president. He has since imposed heavy-handed control over Russia, his policies supposedly motivated in large part by his fear of the US and its European allies, and his dismay at Russia's declining place in the world. Under Putin, Russia has seen the centralization of political power in the hands of the presidency, manipulated elections, the assassination of political opponents, the marginalization of opposition political parties and their leaders, and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. After changes to the constitution, Putin was elected to a fifth term as president in 2024.

Form of government	Federal semi-presidential republic consisting of 85 'subjects', including republics, provinces, and territories. Date of state formation debatable; most recent constitution adopted 1993.
Executive	Semi-presidential. The president is directly elected, and was limited to two consecutive six-year terms until changes orchestrated by Putin. The prime minister comes out of the Duma, heads the Council of Ministers, and succeeds the president if needed (there is no vice-president).
Legislature	Bicameral Federal Assembly: a 450-member State Duma elected for five-year terms, and a relatively weak 166-member Federation Council with two members appointed by the president from each federal unit.
Judiciary	Based on civil law and the constitution of 1993. Headed by a 19-member Constitutional Court (members nominated for 12-year terms by the president and confirmed by the Federation Council) and, for civil and administrative cases, a Supreme Court.
Electoral system	Direct elections for the president, with the possibility of two rounds if no one wins a majority in the first ballot. Party list proportional representation is used for the State Duma.
Parties	Dominant party. The leading party, United Russia, provides a foundation for the authoritarian rule of Vladimir Putin, while other parties are weak and unstable, reflecting rather than shaping power.
Population	144 million
Gross Domestic Product	$2,240 billion
Per capita GDP	$15,270
Democracy Index rating	Authoritarian
Freedom House rating	Not Free
Corruption score	26/100
Human Development Index rating	Very High

CASE STUDY: POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN RUSSIA

Russia offers a case of the limits of political participation in an authoritarian regime. It is an intensely political society with an educated people interested in domestic and international affairs, and yet political participation is shallow, held back by pervasive cynicism about the capacity of ordinary people to make a difference. A 2020 survey in 34 countries (Pew Research Center, 2020b) found that only 38 per cent of Russians believed that their state was run for the benefit of all (compared to 44–48 per cent in the UK, the USA, and Germany), only 40 per cent supported regular competitive elections (compared to a median figure of 70 per cent in the countries surveyed), only 45 per cent supported free speech (median: 74 per cent), and yet 54 per cent felt that voting gave them a say (median: 67 per cent).

NATALIA KOLESNIKOVA / Contributor

Activists gather in central Moscow on the annual Defender of the Fatherland Day to declare their support for Vladimir Putin. Rallies such as this will be sanctioned more often than protests against the government.

Suspicion of organizations is endemic, with more people distrusting than trusting even the highest-rated institutions (the army and the Church) and placing most of their trust in personal networks of friends and family. Political parties languish near the bottom of the trust list, being mainly the creatures of politicians and the president, and proving themselves to be unstable, with an insecure social base.

Few people belong to any voluntary public organizations, membership of trade unions is low, and regular church attendance is uncommon. Few social organizations have lasted long or built large memberships, while others have been incorporated into the Putin regime, and any with foreign links are charged by the regime with being engaged in espionage. With few organizations standing between citizen and state, mass political participation is concentrated on national elections, and Russia remains a distinctly uncivil society. The Russian people are subjects first and participants second.

Public protest in Russia against Putin's manipulation of parliamentary elections in 2011, and of the presidential contests of 2012 and 2018, represented an important development. Younger, better-educated people in the largest cities, notably Moscow, showed their dissatisfaction with their country's leadership. However, the clampdown by the Putin regime on demonstrations in the wake of the suspicious death in prison of his leading critic, Alexei Navalny, in February 2024, was a reminder of the degree to which political participation in Russia had become restricted.

Further reading

Lewis, David G. (2020) *Russia's New Authoritarianism: Putin and the Politics of Order* (Edinburgh University Press).

Sakwa, Richard (2021) *Russian Politics and Society*, 5th edn (Routledge).

White, Stephen, Richard Sakwa, and Henry E. Hale (eds) (2024) *Developments in Russian Politics 10* (Bloomsbury).

14

Elections

CONTENTS

- Understanding elections
- Legislative elections
- Executive elections
- Referendums and initiatives
- Voter turnout
- Elections in authoritarian regimes

PREVIEW

Elections lie at the heart of representative democracy. They are the primary means by which most voters connect with government, they provide the brief moment during which politicians and parties are supplicants rather than supervisors, and they serve as a competition for office and a means of holding governments accountable. Election campaigns also provide an opportunity for a dialogue between voters and parties, and between society and state: as Winston Churchill once said, 'no part of the education of a politician is more indispensable than the fighting of elections'. Competitive elections endow office-holders with authority (contributing to the effectiveness with which they ideally do their jobs), and promote choice, accountability, and legitimacy.

This is all well and good, but ensuring that elections result in equal and accurate representation – and that voters make informed choices, or any choices at all – is easier said than done. Multiple electoral systems have been developed and tried, ranging from plurality to majority and proportional systems, but none has yet resulted in the perfect form of equal representation. This chapter begins by looking at each of these systems and at their use in legislative and executive elections. The results differ according to the methods used, reflecting contrasting ideas of representation and of democracy itself. The chapter then looks at the effects of referendums and initiatives, and at the dynamics of voter turnout. It ends with a discussion of elections in authoritarian regimes, where – despite active manipulation of outcomes – they still perform several key political functions.

HIGHLIGHTS

- There are many different electoral systems in use, but all of them fall short of the core goal of accurately translating votes into seats.
- There are four main electoral systems used in elections for legislatures, each with its own set of advantages and disadvantages.
- Elections for executives are different in both their mechanics and their implications, mainly because a one-person presidency cannot be shared between political parties.
- Referendums and initiatives make voters into decision-makers, but questions remain about how desirable they are for democracy.
- Voter turnout has been on the decline in most democracies, although the reasons vary by time and place.
- Numerous controls are imposed on elections in authoritarian regimes, although the effect is usually to restrict rather than to eliminate political choice.

UNDERSTANDING ELECTIONS

In 2024, India went to the polls in a general election. As one of the two biggest countries in the world by population, the dynamics of its elections were remarkable: more than 900 million people were eligible to vote, and although only two-thirds of them took advantage of that right, the 2024 election still saw the largest number of people who had ever turned out in a national election anywhere, in history. More than 650 political parties competed, fielding just over 8,000 candidates, and voting took place during seven phases between 11 April and 19 May at just over 1 million polling stations. In spite of the challenges, the election went relatively smoothly, resulting in 33 parties sharing the 542 seats in India's Lok Sabha (the lower chamber of the legislature).

Elections such as this lie at the heart of the democratic process, their main purpose being to ensure that the preferences of voters are reflected in the make-up of governments. They serve other functions as well, including the choosing of leaders, providing transparency and legitimation, and encouraging debate and public education (see Figure 14.1). Despite their importance, though, questions have long been asked about the way in which voters approach elections (see *Using Theory 14*), and elections are far from a perfect means for choosing governments, as Issacharoff (2015) implies:

> What possible reason is there to trust the future leadership of [a] country to the outcome of an election? Is it not perfectly predictable that an election, even if fair, would be a referendum on which group would hold power to the possible detriment and exclusion of others? … Elections simply tally up who is the majority and who is the minority.

The problems do not end there, because there are at least three major structural challenges with elections. First, while they are supposed to resolve the question of who governs, they can cause tensions and stresses, and far from determining the make-up of government, they can heighten the chances for political, economic, social, and ethnic conflict. India may have impressive electoral statistics,

Role	*Features*
Representation	Ensuring that voter preferences are reflected in the make-up of governments.
Choosing leaders	Allowing citizens to choose their leaders and to hold them accountable.
Transparency	Obliging parties and candidates to explain their goals and/or defend their records.
Legitimation	Providing legitimacy to the system of government and to the actions of those in power.
Debate and education	Providing an opportunity for debating issues and problems, and educating voters.

Figure 14.1 Elections in democratic regimes

USING THEORY 14

BEHAVIOURALISM

In almost all the other *Using Theory* features in this book, the focus is on theoretical and conceptual approaches to research that are still actively used. In this feature, we look at one that was once briefly popular and that then fell out of favour as its supporters and critics engaged in a debate over its value and then headed off in different directions. We can learn much from examples such as this about the nature of debates over theory, and about how – sometimes – these debates can result in a loss of focus on just what purpose theory serves.

As we saw in Chapter 2, behaviouralism is an approach to the study of politics that emphasizes people over institutions, focusing on the systematic study of the behaviour of individuals. It emerged in the 1950s and 1960s as a reaction to charges that political science was not a science because it was too qualitative and normative. The goal of behaviouralists was to use statistical analysis, observable behaviour, and verifiable facts instead of descriptions, intuition, and anecdotes. Behaviouralists set out to use 'scientific methods' to explain the actions of individuals as distinct from trying to explain and understand the institutions of government.

In few places was the approach used more actively than in the study of elections. It was first used in the United States to explain how voters shifted their long-term support from one party to another, and was behind the development of the idea of party identification discussed in Chapter 15. The approach was then used comparatively to study electoral behaviour in multiple countries. Its supporters claimed that it could be used to explain that behaviour in a neutral and unbiased fashion, but its critics questioned this, mainly on the grounds that people are too different and unpredictable to have their behaviour reduced to rules.

Critics also pointed out that behavioural approaches were too reliant on quantitative research (which meant, for example, the generation of data about electoral behaviour), and that the availability of reliable data was too variable from one country to another. This became particularly clear as more attention was paid to government and politics in authoritarian regimes, where it is still often difficult to build reliable data sets.

The focus of behaviouralists on the *techniques* of study distracted them from the actual *subjects* of study, and barely had behaviouralism become popular in the 1960s than a post-behavioural movement emerged whose claims were to make research more relevant, and to direct it at solving problems. For example, the political scientist David Easton (1962) argued that science could not and never had been value neutral, that substance should have precedence over technique, that political science should not lose touch with the realities of politics, and that research should be put to practical social use. The sun appeared to have quickly risen and set on behaviouralism.

for example, but recent decades have seen the deepening of extremism within the country's Hindu majority, and rising concerns among the Muslim minority about their place within the political system. In few Indian states have ideological tensions generated more violence than in West Bengal, where an estimated 365 politically motivated murders took place between 1999 and 2016 (Rawat, 2019).

Electoral fraud: Illegal interference in the holding of an election.

The second structural challenge is that of preventing **electoral fraud** (or, as in the case of the 2020 US elections or the 2022 Brazilian elections, convincing

people of the *absence* of electoral fraud). There are numerous ways in which the right of citizens to cast a vote and to have it accurately counted can be compromised, ranging from the organizational (having too few polling stations or poll workers, for example) to the outright fraudulent, including voter intimidation, tampering with voting systems, miscounting ballots, and – thanks to changes in technology – hacking. In their book *How to Rig an Election*, based on a study of elections in multiple countries, Cheeseman and Klaas (2018) identify several strategies (summarized in Figure 14.2) found to differing degrees in both democratic and authoritarian regimes. Invisible rigging, for example, is found in the United States in the form of gerrymandering – see *Spotlight 14* at the end of this chapter – while (as we saw in Chapter 13), vote buying is a near-universal phenomenon.

The third structural challenge with elections is arithmetical: how can we make sure that all voters are given an equal role in elections, and that their votes are fairly reflected in the results of elections? The short answer is that we cannot. With the best will in the world, every **electoral system** is mathematically unbalanced, because no **electoral formula** translates the percentage share of votes won by a party into exactly the same percentage share of seats in a legislature. Many people have put their minds to solving this problem, including the Belgian lawyer Victor d'Hondt (1841–1901) and the French mathematician André Sainte-Laguë (1882–1950), for whom the solution lay in a list proportional representation (PR) system. For the English lawyer Thomas Hare (1806–91) and the Danish mathematician Carl Andrae (1812–93), meanwhile, the answer lay in a single transferable vote system. For the American architect W. R. Ware (1832–1915), it lay in an alternative vote system. Despite all their efforts, every electoral system – as we will now see – is flawed in its own way.

Electoral system: A general term for the rules governing an election, including the structure of the ballot (e.g. how many candidates are listed per party), the **electoral formula** (how votes are converted to seats), and districting (the division of the territory into separate constituencies).

Method	*Features*
Invisible rigging	Manipulating district boundaries so as to give selected parties an advantage or a disadvantage in elections.
Buying hearts and minds	Vote buying through the provision of cash, gifts, or services.
Divide and rule	Preventing opposition candidates from campaigning, denying them media access, intimidating voters.
Disinformation	Misleading voters through the provision of false or biased information.
Hacking elections	Digital hacking aimed at changing the electoral debate or the results of elections.
Ballot stuffing	Adding fake votes or allowing voters to cast multiple votes.
Judicial invalidation	Invalidating election results through the use of politically controlled judges or courts.
Potemkin elections	Duping the domestic and international community by offering the illusion of electoral choice. (See Chapter 7 for an explanation of Potemkin villages.)

Figure 14.2 How to rig an election

LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS

Four main electoral systems have been developed for use in legislative elections (summarized in Table 14.1 and Figure 14.3), each with its own set of advantages and disadvantages. The simplest system – single-member plurality – has one of the best records at producing stable majority governments, but one of the weakest records in turning the share of votes into an equal share of seats. Meanwhile, the systems that do best at reflecting voter preferences – notably proportional representation – are more complex and often produce potentially unstable coalition governments.

Table 14.1: Legislative electoral systems

System	Method	Examples
PLURALITY SYSTEMS		
Single-member plurality (SMP)	Single-member districts. Seat awarded to candidate with the most votes. Also known as first-past-the-post (FPTP).	Bangladesh, Canada, India, Kenya, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, UK, USA.
Single non-transferable vote (SNTV)	Multi-member districts. Voters cast one vote, and seats awarded to candidates with the most votes.	Kuwait, Vanuatu.
PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION		
List system	Multi-member districts using lists of candidates. Seats awarded to parties in proportion to their shares of the vote.	Most of Europe and Latin America, South Africa, Turkey.
Single transferable vote (STV)	Multi-member districts. Voters rank candidates, and seats awarded using quota based on a formula and a series of counts.	Australia (upper house), Ireland, India (upper house), Malta.
MAJORITY SYSTEMS		
Two-round system, or runoff	Single-member or multi-member districts. If no candidate wins a majority, the leading candidates contest a second, runoff election. Used more often for executive elections.	Rare. Exceptions include Cuba, France, Haiti, Iran, Mongolia, Vietnam.
Instant runoff	Single-member districts. Voters rank candidates, and winner determined by distribution of first preference votes. Also known as alternative vote (AV) or ranked choice.	Australia, Papua New Guinea.
MIXED SYSTEMS		
Parallel, or mixed member majority (MMM)	Some seats determined by PR and others by SMP or two-round elections. Effectively two separate elections.	Egypt, Hungary, Japan, Mexico, Philippines, Russia, South Korea, Ukraine, Venezuela.
Mixed member proportional (MMP)	Similar to MMM except that PR seats are used to adjust the total share of seats.	Bolivia, Germany, New Zealand.

In most cases, the examples refer to the lower chamber of the legislature (in bicameral systems) or the only chamber in unicameral systems. For a full list of electoral systems, see International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) at http://www.idea.int.

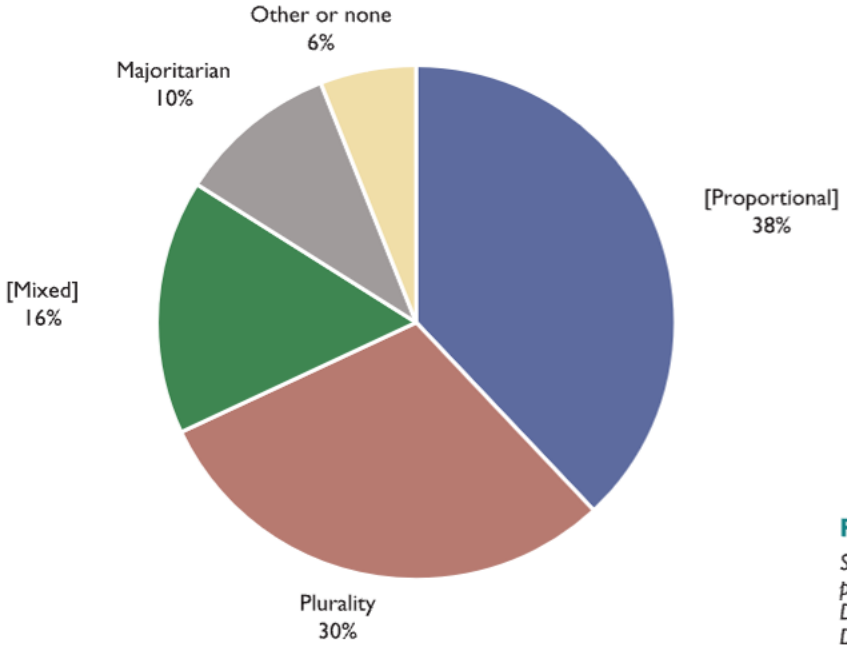


Figure 14.3 Electoral systems

Source: Based on categorization and data provided by International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2024a). Data are for 198 states and territories.

Plurality systems

In the **single-member plurality** (SMP) format (also known as 'first-past-the-post' or 'winner-take-all'), territories are divided into districts (or constituencies) that are each represented by a single member of the legislature. During elections, each district is contested by two or more candidates, and the winner is the one receiving the greatest number of votes, whether this is a plurality (more than anyone else) or a majority (more than 50 per cent). Although old, the plurality system is becoming less common, surviving mainly in Britain and British-influenced states. However, because several of these states are so populous (such as India, Pakistan, the United States, and Nigeria), more people living in democracies vote using this method than any other (Carter et al., 2024).

Single-member plurality: An electoral system based on districts that each have one representative, and in which the winner is the candidate with the most votes.

The main advantages of SMP are its simplicity and the fact that it produces a single district representative. Its critical disadvantage is the prospect of unbalanced results: because parties with strong blocks of support in parts of a country tend to win more seats than parties whose support is spread more thinly, the overall number of votes cast rarely translates into an equivalent number of seats. Consider the following examples:

- In 18 of the 21 general elections held in Britain between 1945 and 2019, a single party won a majority of seats in the House of Commons, even though no party won a majority of votes.
- In the 2019 general election in India, the Bharatiya Janata Party won only 37 per cent of votes but nearly 56 per cent of seats in the national parliament.
- In the 2021 elections in Canada (see Figure 14.4), the governing Liberals won 47 per cent of seats with just under 33 per cent of votes, while the smaller New Democratic Party won nearly 18 per cent of the vote but only 7.4 per cent of seats.

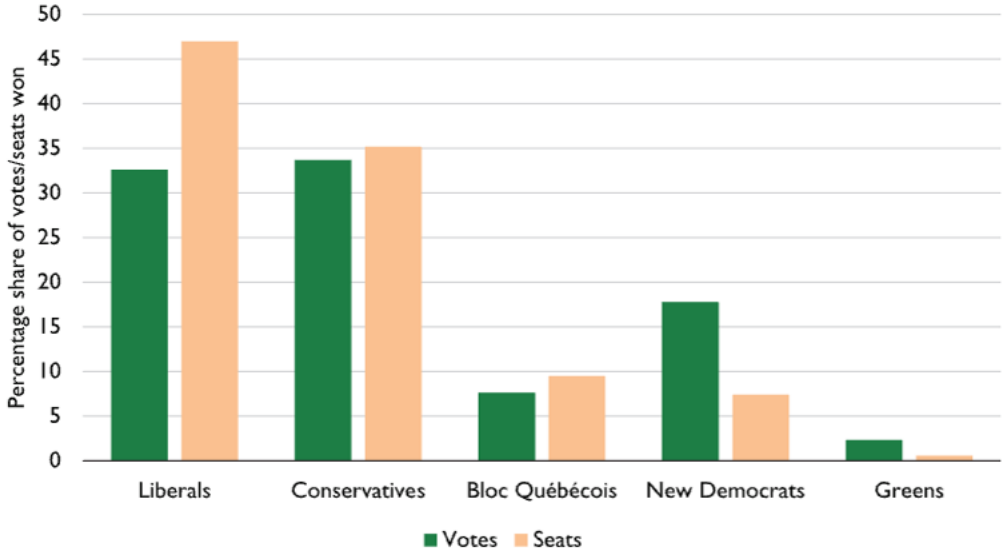


Figure 14.4 The Canadian federal election, 2021

A much rarer form of plurality voting – used only in Hong Kong, Kuwait, Vanuatu, and for the upper chamber of Indonesia's legislature – is the single non-transferable vote (SNTV). In this system, every district has multiple members, but voters can choose only one of the competing candidates. If there are three seats in a district, for example, and 12 competing candidates, voters pick one candidate and the three with the most votes win the seats.

Proportional representation

Proportional representation: An electoral system in which the number of seats won by each of the competing parties is proportional to the number of votes they each win.

The most widely-used electoral system in the world is **proportional representation** (PR). Particularly popular in Europe and Latin America, this assigns seats in a legislature in proportion to the number of votes that each party wins in an election, and voters make their choices more on the basis of parties than of individual candidates. Because a single party rarely wins a majority of seats, the usual result is the kind of coalition government reviewed in Chapter 8.

There are two variations on the theme of PR: the party list system and the single transferable vote. The list system is the most common, and itself comes in several forms. Districts are represented by multiple members, each of the parties contesting an election publishes a list of candidates (typically with the same number of names as there are seats to be filled from the district), and voters choose among the parties running. The number of votes won by each party determines how many candidates are elected from each party list, while the order in which candidates appear on the list (predetermined by the party itself) usually determines who is elected.

Some countries – such as Belgium, South Africa, and Spain – use closed lists that allow voters only a straight choice among parties. In this format, party officials exert enormous control over the writing of each list, including the ability to include women and minorities near the top. However, most European

countries use open lists that give voters at least some choice between candidates. This option, known as preference voting, allows voters to select one or more named candidates from the party list. The total number of votes cast for a given list still determines the party's overall representation, but a candidate's preference votes influence (to varying degrees) which candidates on each list are elected.

The second and rarer variety of proportional representation – used only in Ireland and Malta – is the single transferable vote (STV) system, which uses multi-member districts and requires voters to rank the competing candidates. When one of the candidates reaches a pre-set quota of first preference votes, they are declared elected, and their surplus first preferences are distributed to other candidates according to second preferences. Candidates with the fewest votes are eliminated. This process continues until all the seats available have been filled.

Most PR systems include a threshold, so that if a party's percentage share of the vote does not meet a pre-set minimum it wins no seats. This helps to protect government from too much party fragmentation, or the problem of small parties having too much power (the tail wagging the dog). The threshold varies, with a range of 3–5 per cent in most countries, and a high of 10 per cent in Turkey. The cost of a threshold that is too low is reflected in Israel, where the 2013 election – based on a 2 per cent threshold – saw 12 parties winning seats in the 120-member Knesset. Six of these parties each won less than 5 per cent of the vote, but among them they controlled 25 seats, while the biggest party, Likud, controlled only 31. The threshold was raised in 2014 to 3.25 per cent, but while it temporarily reduced the number of winning parties, the Knesset remained

SOPA Images / Contributor

Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu celebrates his return to office following the 2022 elections. He headed a factionalized government in which small parties pulled Israel to the political right.

fragmented, obliging Israel to hold no less than five elections between April 2019 and November 2022 because so many small parties continued to hold the balance of power. As well as preventing the formation of a stable government, the effect was also to allow several small right-wing parties to pull government in their direction.

Majority systems

As the label implies, majority electoral systems oblige the winning candidate to earn a majority of votes, the democratic argument being that no candidate should be elected to office without proving themselves acceptable to most voters. The usual way of doing this is through a two-round election (also known as a runoff election) in which all candidates run against each other in a district, and if one wins more than 50 per cent of the vote they are declared the winner. If no one passes the 50 per cent mark, the top two candidates from the first round compete in a second round held soon afterwards, thereby ensuring that one wins a majority. Although once common in much of Western Europe, runoffs are now significant for legislative elections only in France and its ex-colonies. They are used more widely for executive elections, and so are covered in more detail later in this chapter.

The rare instant runoff voting (IRV) option takes matters to a higher level of complexity and demands more thought from voters, who must rank the candidates (as many or as few as they like). If one wins a majority of 'first preference' votes, that candidate is elected. If no one wins a majority, the last-placed candidate is eliminated and their votes reassigned, a process which continues until one candidate has a majority. Only Australia and Papua New Guinea use this system for national legislative elections, but it is also used in some local elections in Britain and New Zealand (where it is known as alternative vote, or AV), and the United States (where it is known as ranked voting). Candidates are given the incentive to run less divisive campaigns and to take less extreme positions in order to win more of the middle ground of the electorate. An effort to introduce AV for British general elections was heavily defeated in a 2011 national referendum, in part because voters found the system too complex.

Mixed systems

The fourth kind of electoral system involves a hybrid of plurality and PR systems, designed to maximize their advantages and minimize their disadvantages. The simplest version – used in Italy, Japan, Mexico, Russia, and Venezuela, among others – is parallel voting, or mixed member majority (MMM), which uses unlinked SMP/majority and party list votes. These amount to what are effectively two separate elections, with voters choosing among competing candidates to represent their local district, and among party lists to represent larger regions. In Japan's House of Representatives, for example, 289 members are elected by SMP and 176 by PR. Voters cast two ballots (one for a candidate and one for a party), and because parties can assign candidates to both the single-member districts and the PR lists, candidates who lose in the former still have a chance of winning in the latter.

Another version of a mixed system – mixed member proportional (MMP) (sometimes called 'compensatory PR') – also uses a hybrid of SMP and PR, but links the two by using the PR list vote to 'top up' seats so as to produce a proportional outcome overall. In Germany, voters cast two votes on the same ballot: one for a representative from the country's 299 electoral districts on the basis of SMP, and one for a party running in Germany's 16 *Länder* (states) on the basis of party list PR. The ideal is that each party wins the same proportion of votes, SMP seats, and PR seats, but this rarely happens, so some topping up is done. If a party wins more seats in the district vote than in the party list vote, then all other parties are compensated by being given extra seats (known variously as balancing, levelling, or adjustment seats) so that the total number of seats they each win is more reflective of their share of the vote.

The 2021 election results reveal the effects (see Table 14.2). The Social Democrats won a far bigger percentage share of seats in the district vote (40.5 per cent) than merited by their share of the vote (26.4 per cent), so no adjustment to their total was needed. However, four smaller parties (the right-wing Alternative for Germany, the centrist Free Democrats, the Left party, and the Greens) among them won less than 12 per cent of the district seats despite winning nearly 38 per cent of the district vote, so they were given balancing seats to offset the mismatch. The Free Democrats, for example, won no district seats at all, and earned only 11.5 per cent of the party list vote, but they ended up with 92 seats, or 12.5 per cent of the total. The system is easy neither to describe nor to understand, and it results in a changing number of representatives in the Bundestag, but it provides a fairly accurate reflection of voter preferences while retaining a representative for each district.

Table 14.2: The German federal election, 2021

	District vote			Party list		
Party	**% share votes**	**Seats**	**% share seats**	**% share votes**	**Seats**	**Total seats**
Social Democrats	26.4	121	40.5	25.7	85	206
Christian Democrats	22.5	98	32.8	18.9	54	152
Alliance 90/The Greens	14.0	16	5.3	14.8	102	118
Free Democrats	8.7	0	0	11.5	92	92
Alternative for Germany	10.1	16	5.3	10.3	67	83
Christian Social Union	6.0	45	15.0	5.2	0	45
The Left	5.0	3	1.0	4.9	36	39
Other parties	7.3	0	0	3.6	1	1
TOTAL	100%	299	100%	100%	437	736

EXECUTIVE ELECTIONS

While the electoral systems used for legislatures are varied and sometimes complex, those used for presidents are relatively straightforward, since a one-person presidency cannot be shared between parties. This eliminates PR as an option, leaving the main choice between plurality and majority systems.

Mandate: A commission to act on another's behalf in a specific area. An election mandate is an authorization from the people for the government to follow a particular course.

While plurality systems tend to be the simplest, they can also fail to produce a convincing **mandate**: the more parties contesting the election, the more this problem is likely to arise, and presidents who win office without a majority will have less credibility and less ability to pursue their policy agendas. The problem was particularly acute for Fidel Ramos when he became president of the Philippines in 1992 with just under 24 per cent of the vote – hardly a resounding endorsement. Rodrigo Duterte won in 2016 with 39 per cent of the vote; better, but still far short of a majority. In Mexico, meanwhile, winning candidates rarely do well: Felipe Calderón's winning share of the vote in 2006 was just 36 per cent, and Enrique Peña Nieto's share in 2012 was just 38 per cent. It was not until 2018 that Andrés Manuel López Obrador was able to win a more convincing 53 per cent share.

For these reasons, the majority two-round system is used more often for presidential elections. In the first round, all eligible candidates compete, and if one wins more than half the vote, that candidate is declared the winner. If no one wins more than half the vote, then a second round is held between the two top-placed candidates, usually within two to three weeks of the first contest. Argentina has an unusual variation on this theme: a candidate can win in the first round with 45 per cent of the vote, or with 40 per cent of the vote so long as they have at least ten percentage points more than the runner-up. As well as ensuring that the winner attracts the support of the majority of voters, the two-round system also encourages the two runoff candidates to reach out to unsuccessful candidates from the first round, which may be helpful in promoting more broadly based politics. On the other hand, two-round elections extend the campaign season and its associated costs, and open the door to potentially dangerous tactical voting in the first round.

France is a notable case (see Evans and Ivaldi, 2018). French voters, it is sometimes said, vote with their hearts in the first round and with their heads in the second, which creates the possibility of unexpected surprises. This is best illustrated by going back to the case of the 2002 presidential election (see Table 14.3). The conservative incumbent, Jacques Chirac, was running for a second term, but had lost popularity and the election was held against a background of concerns about law and order. It was expected that the two major contenders would be Chirac and his socialist opponent, Lionel Jospin, but many voters expressed their displeasure with Chirac by voting for minor candidates in the first round. While Chirac came out on top, it was by only a small margin (just over 3 percentage points), and Jospin was knocked into third place by the right-wing National Front candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen. Shocked by the result, most voters determined to block Le Pen at the second round, turnout grew to nearly 80 per cent, and Chirac won more than 82 per cent of the vote, by far the biggest winning margin for a president in the history of modern France.

Table 14.3: The French presidential election, 2002

Candidate	Party	First round (%)	Second round (%)
Jacques Chirac	Rally for the Republic	19.88	82.21
Jean-Marie Le Pen	National Front	16.86	17.79
Lionel Jospin	Socialist	16.18	–
François Bayrou	Union for French Democracy	6.84	–
Arlette Laguiller	Workers' Struggle	5.72	–
11 other candidates		34.52	–
Votes cast		28.5 million	31.0 million
Percentage turnout		71.6	79.7

As an interesting side-note, three countries – Indonesia, Kenya, and Nigeria – go beyond a simple runoff by requiring winning candidates to meet additional **distribution requirements** proving the breadth as well as the depth of their support. In the case of Nigeria, which has substantial ethnic, regional, and religious divisions, a victorious president must show regional as well as national support. In the first round, the winning target is a majority of all votes cast and at least 25 per cent of the vote in at least two-thirds of Nigeria's 36 states. If no candidate crosses this barrier, a second round is held between the top two finishers from the first round with the same requirements. If the barrier is still not crossed, a third round is held between the two top finishers, with a simple majority being enough.

Distribution requirements: Rules specifying how a winning candidate's votes must be arranged across different regions or social groups.

Meanwhile, several countries use indirect elections to choose their presidents. Examples include several parliamentary systems with non-executive presidents, such as Germany and India, but the United States is unique in using an electoral college to choose its president (see *Spotlight 14* and discussion in Alexander, 2019). The College was originally designed to filter the voice of the people through an assembly of 'wise men', but the dangers of this anachronistic system have been on display in several recent presidential elections:

- In 2000, the winner of the popular vote (Al Gore) lost the Electoral College vote to George W. Bush, against a background of deeply flawed vote recording and rules on access to voting booths.
- In 2008, Barack Obama won 68 per cent of the votes in the Electoral College, despite winning just 53 per cent of the popular vote.
- In 2016, Hillary Clinton won 2.8 million more votes than Donald Trump (48.3 per cent of the popular vote to Trump's 46.1 per cent), and yet she lost the Electoral College vote – and the election – to Trump by a margin of 304 votes to 227.

One other feature of presidential elections is worth noting: presidents are more likely than legislators to be subject to term limits (see Table 14.4 for some of the alternatives used). The fear is that without such constraints presidents will be able to exploit their unique position to win endless re-election. Term limits, though, can have unintended consequences: presidents who cannot be re-elected are no longer directly accountable to the voters, and such presidents

Table 14.4: Presidential election systems

Country	Method	Term (years)	Limits
Argentina	Two rounds	4	Maximum two consecutive terms
Nigeria	Up to three rounds	4	Two terms
Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Egypt, Iran	Two rounds	4	Two terms
Chile	Two rounds	4	No consecutive terms allowed
United States	Electoral college	4	Two terms
South Africa	Elected by legislature	5	Two terms
China	Elected by legislature	5	Unlimited
Bolivia	Two rounds	5	Unlimited
France, Turkey	Two rounds	5	Two terms
Peru	Two rounds	5	No consecutive terms allowed
Mexico, Philippines	Plurality	6	One term
Russia	Two rounds	6	Two consecutive terms
Venezuela	Plurality	6	Unlimited

often lose political clout as their term nears its end. One of the more stringent sets of limits is found in Mexico, where neither presidents nor state governors can serve more than one six-year term, and legislators were until recently barred from serving consecutive terms.

REFERENDUMS AND INITIATIVES

Elections are the best-known means by which citizens participate in government, but their role is only to decide who will decide. By contrast, voters become the decision-makers when they participate in referendums and initiatives, because they are casting votes on focused issues that usually result directly in forming policy. It is questionable, though, if these devices – where they are offered – are necessarily good for democracy.

Referendum: A vote of the electorate on a limited issue of public policy such as a constitutional amendment.

The **referendum** is the most important form of direct democracy. Referendums may be mandatory (meaning that they must be called on specified topics, such as constitutional amendments), optional, or even constitutionally forbidden except on a few reserved subjects such as taxation and public spending. Their outcome may be binding, as with constitutional amendments requiring popular approval, or advisory, as with Britain's 2016 vote on continued membership of the European Union. (The advisory element was ignored, though, when the government of the day opted to formally act on the result.)

No country uses referendums more often than Switzerland, which has a devolved system of government that resulted in the holding of just over 500 votes between 1940 and 2023 (see Figure 14.5) on issues as varied as nuclear power, same-sex partnerships, and immigration. Australia, too, makes use of state and

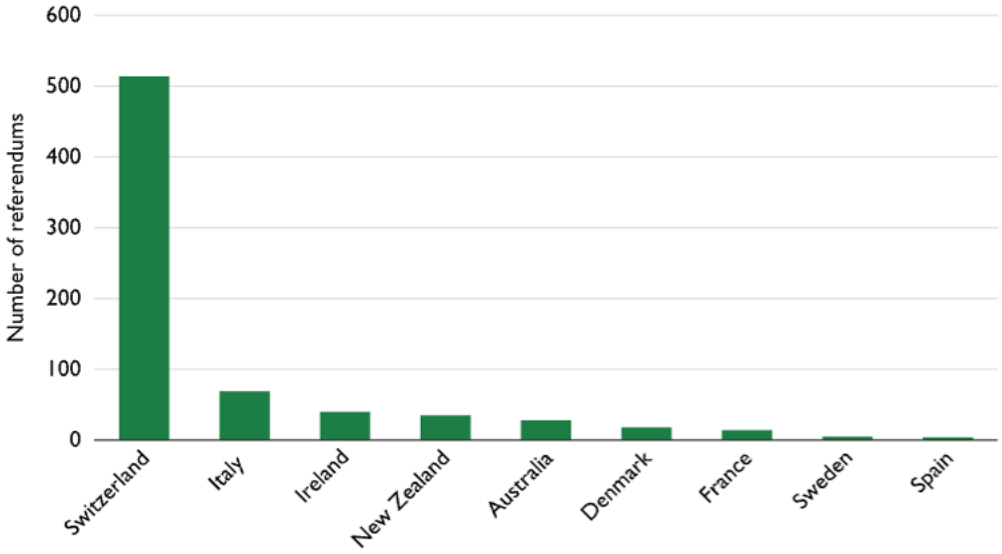


Figure 14.5 The use of referendums

Source: Adapted from Morel (2007): table 1, containing data for the period 1940–2007. Updated to the end of 2023 using information in the public domain.

national referendums, but only on changes to the constitution: more than 40 have been held since the creation of the federation of Australia in 1901, although less than a quarter have resulted in a Yes vote. The most recent, in 2023, was to give indigenous Australians recognition through the creation of an advisory parliamentary body; it was turned down by more than 60 per cent of voters, based on nearly 90 per cent turnout. National referendums have also become more common in several of the member states of the European Union, where they have been used for decisions on joining the EU or the euro, and for adopting new EU treaties.

Referendums have both advantages and disadvantages (see Qvortrup, 2018). The advantages include the following:

- Providing a channel by which governments can hear directly from voters rather than via elected officials, parties, or interest groups.
- Acting as a purer form of democracy because they allow voters to more frequently have a say in government.
- Helping improve voter understanding of the issues at stake, and increasing the confidence of voters in their own political abilities and their faith in government responsiveness.
- Informing politicians about voter opinions that might otherwise have gone unnoticed.
- Providing a safety valve, allowing a government to put an issue to the people when it is unable to reach a decision itself.

At the same time, referendums pose several problems:

- They can be expensive to organize and to hold.
- The issues at stake may be too complex for a straight Yes/No choice.
- They can polarize the electorate by heightening controversy and division.
- In order to be fully effective, voters must do their research.
- The timing of the vote can be critical.

- Too many referendums can tire the voters, reducing turnout.
- Voter judgements are often informed by wider considerations than the specific proposition on the ballot.
- The debate on the issue can be sidetracked by misinformation and disinformation.

In addition to all these difficulties, referendums can easily be compromised by confusion about the wording of the question to be put to the voters. We saw in Chapter 13 the problems arising from the wording of the 2016 Brexit referendum in Britain. Two years earlier, in the case of the referendum about Scottish independence held in 2014, the Scottish National Party initially proposed the question, 'Do you agree that Scotland should be an independent country?' The UK Electoral Commission intervened, successfully arguing that 'Should Scotland be an independent country?' was more neutral. Later, though, there were concerns that the wording made the pro-independence campaign into a positive Yes campaign, and the anti-independence campaign into a negative No campaign. Such intricacies of wording and tone do not arise with conventional elections.

Initiative: A procedure which allows citizens to initiate a popular vote on a given proposal (a referendum initiative) or to place it on the legislature's agenda (an agenda initiative).

Moving next to **initiatives**, these allow citizens to take the lead in making policy. There are two kinds, the first being a *referendum initiative*, which allows a given number of citizens to initiate a popular vote on a given proposal. Nearly 40 countries, most of them in Europe and Latin America, allow this option. In Switzerland, for example, 100,000 electors can propose a new law at canton level, or an amendment to the constitution at federal level. Elsewhere, as in several states of the United States, referendum initiatives can be used more broadly to vote on proposed or existing policies. Abortion, for example, has been the topic of several recent initiatives or propositions, in the wake of a 2022 Supreme Court decision returning to the states the authority to decide law on the topic.

The second type is an *agenda initiative*, which functions as a petition to the legislature, obliging it to discuss a particular topic if the required number of voter signatures is reached. This mechanism was introduced to the constitutions of several European countries after World War I (including Austria and Spain) and has since been extended to other states (such as Poland and Thailand) (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2024b). One successful example from Austria was the 2006 initiative supported by more than 250,000 signatories that requested a national referendum in the event that Turkey be proposed for membership of the European Union. In Britain, a petition with at least 100,000 signatures must be considered by the House of Commons for debate, provided at least one member speaks in support.

Voter turnout: The number of voters who take part in an election, expressed as a percentage of the total number of eligible voters.

VOTER TURNOUT

So far, this chapter has focused on the structure of elections. Equally important for a comparative understanding of government and politics is the question of **voter turnout**: if voters do not cast their votes, what impact does this have on elections and on the quality of democracy? Rates of turnout vary by

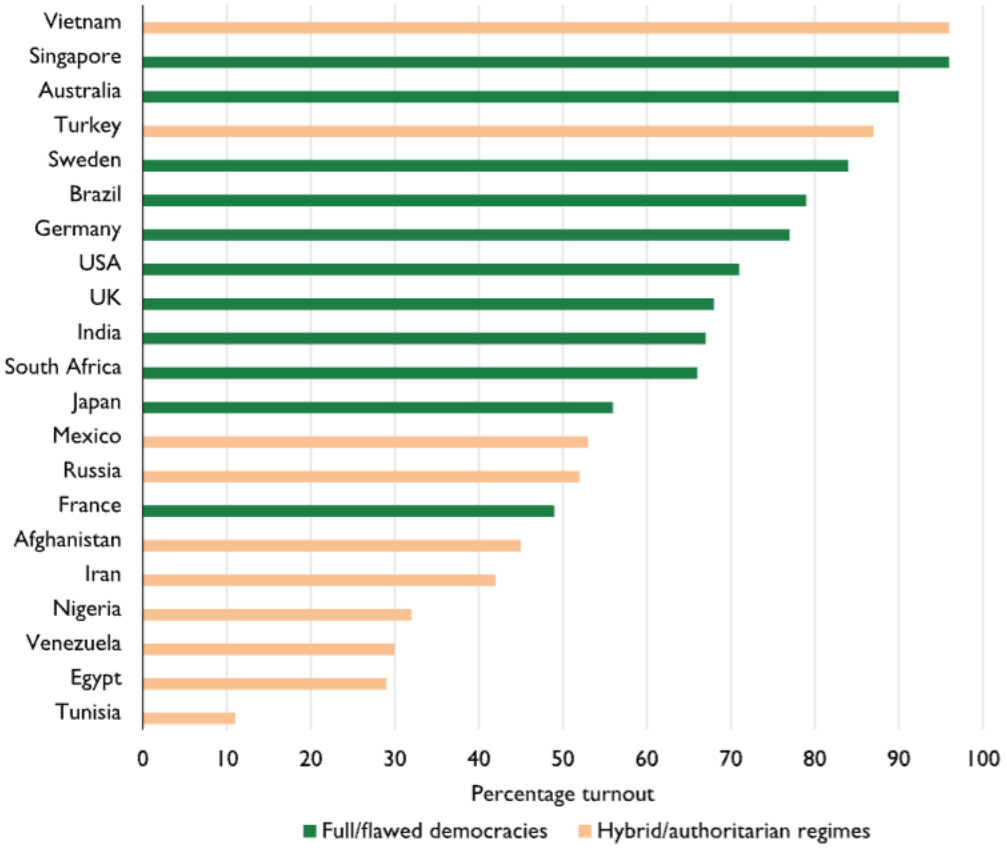


Figure 14.6 Comparing voter turnout

Source: Based on International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2024c). Figures are for voting age population in most recent national legislative elections. No data for China, which does not hold national elections. For latest information, see IDEA athttps://www.idea.int.

time and place, ranging from a high of about 90 per cent or more to a low of less than 20 per cent, with an average in most democracies of about 50–70 per cent. Figure 14.6 offers some examples, but interpreting the numbers must be approached with caution:

- Vietnam may consistently top the turnout list, for example, but the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) holds a monopoly on power, presses local officials to encourage turnout in order to give the impression of having a popular mandate, and allows proxy voting by which one person can vote for an entire family (Sochua, 2021). Were elections in Vietnam to be free, fair, and competitive, turnout would likely be lower.
- In Iran and Venezuela, meanwhile, turnout numbers have changed in the wake of political turmoil: in Iran, they peaked in 2000 at nearly 83 per cent before dropping to a low of 42 per cent in 2020, while in Venezuela they peaked at 96 per cent in 1973 and ultimately collapsed to just over 30 per cent in 2020. Tunisia also once had healthy numbers in the range of 80–90 per cent, falling in 2023 to the lowest turnout reported by any country: just 11.4 per cent.

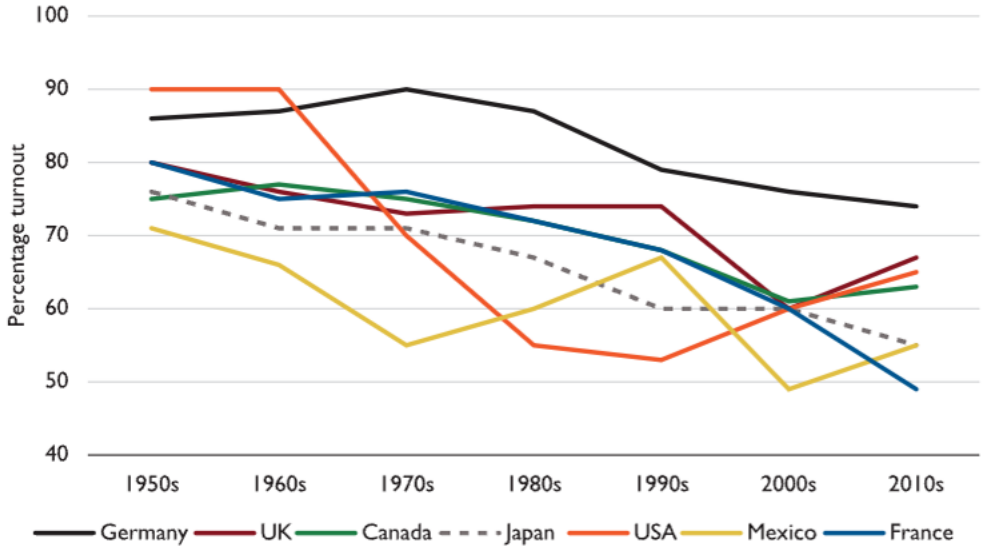


Figure 14.7 Comparing trends in voter turnout

Source: Based on International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2024c). Figures are for voting age population in national legislative elections.

- At the other end of the scale, turnout in Australia, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Singapore is consistently high in part because all four countries have mandatory voting; see later in this chapter.

Looking at trends over time in selected democracies (see Figure 14.7), turnout rates have mainly fallen since the 1950s: they are down by 31 percentage points in France, for example, by 25 points in the United States (although they have recently rebounded), by 20 points in Japan, and by 12 points in Germany. It is not always clear what has caused the drop, and it is debatable whether we should even be worried about the trends, given what we saw in Chapter 13 about the diversification of participation; citizens may still be engaged, but through different means, and less directly. Meanwhile, high turnout can be interpreted as a sign of healthy civic engagement, but it can also be a result of political division, intense party competition, or concern about the direction being taken by a country or its government.

If there is a single explanation for falling turnout, it is declining satisfaction with the performance of democratic governments, and a rational choice calculation that the benefits of voting are offset by the costs, including a widespread sense that voting does not produce much change. We have seen in several other chapters in this book how trust in government has fallen, and even though support for democratic principles remains strong, rising cynicism about government performance has encouraged more people to stay away from the polls. There are also some practical reasons for deflated turnout, as reflected in the recipe for higher turnout in Table 14.5.

Table 14.5: A recipe for higher voter turnout

Features of the political system	Features of voters
Compulsory voting	Middle aged
Automatic registration	Well educated
Voting by mail, by proxy and online permitted	Married
Advance voting permitted	Higher income
Weekend polling	Employed
Election decides who governs	Homeowner
Cohesive parties	Strong party loyalty
Proportional representation	Churchgoer
Close result anticipated	Membership of a labour union
Small electorate	No recent change of residence
Expensive campaigns	Voted in previous elections
Elections for several posts held at same time	

Sources: Based on Endersby et al. (2006), Geys (2006), International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2024a).

On the cost side of the equation, turnout is reduced when voters are required to take the initiative in registering, as in the United States. In most European countries, by contrast, registration is the responsibility of government, helping encourage turnout. Turnout is also lower when citizens must vote in person and on a weekday, and hence higher turnout can be encouraged by allowing voting on a weekend, by proxy, by mail, online, and at convenient locations such as supermarkets. The ability to vote in advance is also helpful; the number of voters casting their ballot in advance of election day has been growing steadily in the United States, for example, reaching a new record in 2020 of 101 million (United States Elections Project, 2021).

On the benefit side of the equation, the greater the impact of a single vote, and the closer the contest, the more willing voters are likely to be to incur the costs of voting. Multiple studies over several decades have also made the point that proportional representation is the most effective electoral system in terms of encouraging turnout, in part because the benefits of voting are clearer: each vote counts because seats gained directly reflect votes won. In the single-member plurality system, by contrast, many electoral districts are safe for a particular party, meaning that individual votes are unlikely to affect the result, and voters are less likely to turn out, particularly if they support the opposition.

Attempts to boost turnout must be sensitive to political realities: while increased participation may benefit the system as a whole, it will have an unequal impact on the parties active within it. Conservative parties in particular will be cautious about schemes for encouraging turnout, because abstainers would probably vote disproportionately for parties of the left. There remains one other blunt but effective tool for promoting turnout: mandatory voting (see *Exploring Problems 14*).

EXPLORING PROBLEMS 14

SHOULD VOTING BE MANDATORY?

Assuming that we see low voter turnout as a problem, what are the solutions? Table 14.5 lists many of the practical elements in the debate, all of which can contribute in their own way to nudging the numbers higher. At the end of the day, though, the ultimate answer to low turnout is to make voting compulsory. First introduced in Belgium in 1892, followed by Argentina in 1914 and Australia in 1924, it is today used in fewer than 30 countries, some of which enforce it (using fines, imprisonment, or disenfranchisement as a sanction) and some of which do not (see Table 14.6). Voter turnout in these countries is about 7 percentage points higher on average than in countries where voting is voluntary (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2024d).

Among the arguments in favour of mandatory voting: the electorate is more likely to be representative, the authority of the government is enhanced, disengaged voters and groups are drawn into the political process, voters are more likely overall to be informed, and parties no longer need to devote so many resources to encouraging their supporters to vote. Most citizens acknowledge that it is their civic duty to pay taxes, serve on a jury, and perhaps even fight in a war; why, then, should they not want to invest the small amount of effort involved in voting at elections? Without it, abstainers take a free ride at the expense of the conscientious.

However, the arguments against mandatory voting are also strong. It undermines the free choice which is an essential part of democracy, requiring people to participate smacks of authoritarianism, and it gives influence to less-informed and less-engaged voters. Brennan (2011) argues that nothing is more integral to democracy than voting, but 'if citizens do vote, they must vote well, on the basis of sound evidence for what is likely to promote the common good'. If they lack the capacity to vote well, he continues, then they should not vote at all. Finally, he concludes, 'there is no evidence that high turnout increases the quality of the political choices made, so why not continue to rely on the natural division of labour between interested voters and indifferent abstainers?'.

Several questions are raised here:

- Should we be concerned about low voter turnout?
- If so, should we focus on the characteristics outlined in Table 14.5 as a means of encouraging higher turnout?
- Is compulsory voting a viable answer?
- Should we leave well enough alone and not be too concerned about overall numbers, or about what those numbers tell us about differences in turnout by social class, income, education, ethnicity, or other factors?

Table 14.6: Countries with mandatory voting

Compulsory voting enforced		Compulsory voting not enforced	
Argentina	Luxembourg	Bolivia	Gabon
Australia	Nauru	Bulgaria	Honduras
Belgium	Peru	Costa Rica	Mexico
Brazil	Singapore	Dominican	Republic Paraguay
Cyprus	Turkey	Egypt	Thailand
Ecuador	Uruguay		

Source: Based on International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2024d).

Note: Voting is also mandatory in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Lebanon, and Panama, but there is no information regarding whether or not it is enforced. Countries that no longer use compulsory voting include Chile, Fiji, Italy, and Venezuela.

ELECTIONS IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

The story is told by Cheeseman and Klaas (2018) of elections held in 2013 in Azerbaijan, a former Soviet republic in central Asia that today ranks as one of the most repressive regimes in the world. Seeking to boost its credibility, the government of President Ilham Aliyev (who first won the presidency in 2003, and was still in office as this book went to press more than two decades later) launched an iPhone app that could be used by Azerbaijanis to follow the elections, and to see returns as they came in. Many people opened the app the day before the election in order to test the new technology, and were surprised to find the results already posted. They could see who had won, who had lost, and the numbers of votes cast, before a single ballot had actually been cast. When challenged, the government claimed that the results being shown were those from a previous election, but this did not explain how all the candidates listed were those contesting the current election.

This story emphasizes one of the hard realities of global politics: that six out of ten people in the world live under authoritarian rule, and that while few of them go without elections of some kind, the results of those elections are often not to be trusted. The polls are often marred by manipulation and corruption, occasionally producing turnout numbers and shares of support for the 'winner' that beggar belief. Under the circumstances, do elections really serve any purpose in authoritarian regimes, or are they simply window-dressing? The short answer is that they are sometimes more than window-dressing because the way in which they are organized (and manipulated) tells us a lot about the nature of authoritarian government. There are also multiple practical functions fulfilled by elections for authoritarian rulers and elites (see Figure 14.8).

There are few countries that have entirely done away with elections: Brunei has not had one since 1962 (it has an appointed legislative council with only advisory powers), and Somalia had none between 1980 and 2012, but only because of a breakdown in the system of government. Neither Saudi Arabia nor Eritrea has national elections, but they do have local elections. In the last remaining handful of communist systems, meanwhile, elections are held within

Role	Features
Co-option of the elite	Rulers can use elections to co-opt elites, party members, or large social groups by spreading the spoils of office.
Co-option of the opposition	Allowing some opposition members to be elected shares out some of the spoils of office and divides the opposition.
Generating information	Elections help the regime identify its supporters and opponents, helping it know who to reward, intimidate, or punish.
Averting revolution	Allowing the poor to vote and be elected can avert the threat of revolution.
Engaging citizens	Limited local-level democracy can encourage voter engagement and hold local politicians to account.
'Legitimacy'	Elections signal that the regime can claim to be based on popular will, even if its assertion is groundless.

Figure 14.8 Elections in authoritarian regimes

the ruling party system at the local level, with each level electing the next until the pinnacle of the system is reached. There is little pretence at offering choice, though, and no possibility that a ruling party could be defeated, or even seriously opposed, through elections.

Vietnam, for example, regularly holds elections to its 483-member National Assembly, and the Communist Party just as routinely wins 95 per cent or more of the seats, the few opposition representatives sitting as independents. In China, meanwhile, voters elect delegates to county and township congresses, who elect delegates to provincial congresses, who elect delegates to the National People's Congress. Multiple candidates are allowed to run in elections, and secret ballots are allowed, but no explicit opposition to the policy platform of the Chinese Communist Party is permitted. The traditional purpose of elections in modern China, argues Hill (2019) is not to elevate the will of the voters so much as to enhance the power and efficacy of the government. Chinese leaders argue that they already know what the Chinese people want (national wealth and power), which can only be achieved through decisive state action, and can only succeed if strong links exist between the people and their leaders.

Electoral authoritarianism: An arrangement in which a regime gives the appearance of being democratic, and offering voters choice, while concealing its authoritarian qualities.

In most other authoritarian regimes, meanwhile, elections are held, and while they are sometimes postponed for one reason or another (civil unrest, natural disasters, or public health emergencies, for example), voters mainly know when to expect them, and they are usually contested by multiple candidates and parties, even if the result is rarely a surprise. Under these circumstances, rulers pursue an arrangement sometimes known as **electoral authoritarianism**. Like many concepts in the social sciences, its exact meaning is disputed, and it can be applied across a wide spectrum of political system types, but Schedler (2013) defines it as a regime that adopts democratic institutions – such as regular

multiparty elections, legislatures, and judiciaries – but then sabotages them so as to rule in an authoritarian fashion. For Levitsky and Way (2010), the key distinguishing feature of these regime is that competition is 'real but unfair'.

In other words, there may be regular elections with multiple candidates, but voting is so controlled and manipulated as to effectively remove the possibility of defeat for the incumbent government. Meaningful competition may happen locally but is not allowed to shape the national outcome. The result (typically known in advance, as we saw with the case of Azerbaijan) is proclaimed by the regime as signalling support for its policies. In effect, voters are co-opted, even against their will, to 'approve' the work of the government. Few of them are fooled by the manipulation, but most of them also find that there is a limit to what they can do to offset the problem without risking their personal safety.

Egypt is an example of electoral authoritarianism at work. There were five presidential 'elections' during the administration of Hosni Mubarak (1981–2011), but the first four were actually referendums in which he ran unopposed and never (officially) won less than 94 per cent of the votes cast. He had two opponents in 2005 but was still able to win nearly 89 per cent of the vote. There were also seven rounds of legislative elections during his administration, ostensibly contested by multiple parties, but his ruling National Democratic Party always managed to win overwhelming majorities. The cause of the ruling regime was underpinned by the large number of voters who were prevented from participating by not being allowed to register to vote (see Figure 14.9). By 2010, there were more than 20 million unregistered voters in Egypt, amounting to two out of every five eligible voters.

Following the 2011 revolution, the laws were changed to arrange for automatic universal voter registration, which had the effect of registering almost all eligible voters and increasing turnout in 2012 by nearly 250 per cent. The

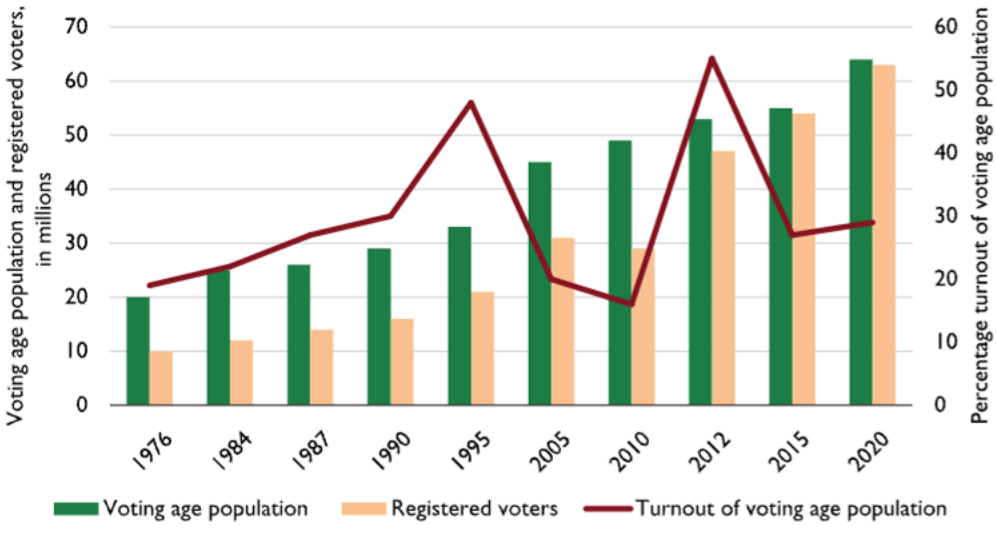


Figure 14.9 Voter turnout trends in Egypt

Source: Based on International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2024c). Figures are for national legislative elections.

enthusiasm for Egypt's new democracy was to be short-lived, however, and while the numbers of registered and eligible voters remained about the same in 2015, turnout fell to Mubarak-era levels thanks to voter disenchantment with the return of electoral fraud. Abdel Fattah El-Sisi – the former military leader who had repackaged himself as a civilian president – romped home with an alleged 97 per cent share of the vote in the 2014 presidential election, and again in the 2018 election. By the time of the 2020 legislative elections, El-Sisi's Nation's Future Party controlled just over half the seats in the Egyptian House of Representatives. Clearly, not much had changed in Egypt.

Another case of manipulation hiding behind free choice is found in Iran. While it holds regular elections for its president and legislature, the Supreme Leader of the country is appointed for life, there are limits on political parties, and elections are manipulated by Iran's religious elite to undermine prospects for regime opponents. The Supreme Leader uses his powers to undermine any candidates who might threaten the conservative Islamic agenda that has dominated Iranian politics since 1979, and the Guardian Council (a group of 12 clerics and jurists) checks the credentials of all candidates to ensure that they support the ideals of the revolution. All candidates are required to proclaim their loyalty both to the rule of the Leader and to the proposition that religious clerics hold ultimate political power. In this way, a large number of potentially troublesome candidates are excluded. The Guardian Council has also interpreted the constitutional requirement that candidates should be 'religious or political personalities' to prevent women from standing for president.

Majid Saeedi / Stringer

Voters line up at a polling station during local elections in Iran. In spite of a ban on political parties in Iran, and charges of electoral fraud, voters are presented with an array of candidates representing different policy positions.

In Russia, Vladimir Putin has been a skilled exponent of electoral authoritarianism, although Smyth (2020) argues that competition – no matter how weak – leaves Russia more vulnerable to opposition challenges than many Western observers realize. During the Soviet era, people were allowed to proxy vote on behalf of their entire family, and official turnout numbers ran as high as 99.99 per cent. Putin has since had to deal with a multi-party system and lukewarm voter turnout (in the range of 65–70 per cent for presidential elections, but as low as 48 per cent for legislative elections), but he and the governing party (United Russia) still win, using a variety of means (Sakwa et al., 2019):

- Political parties must be formally registered, which means, in effect, that they must be approved by the administration.
- The registration process is expensive and time-consuming.
- Access to the media (particularly television) is controlled in favour of United Russia and other approved parties.
- The organization of public demonstrations is strictly controlled.
- On Election Day, workers in state-funded institutions (such as factories, hospitals, and military bases) are ordered to vote, preferably for United Russia.
- Instances of **ballot stuffing** and the deliberate spoiling of ballots by vote counters are usually rife.

Ballot stuffing: A form of electoral fraud in which a person limited by law to a single vote is able to cast multiple votes in a single booth or to vote in multiple locations.

In hybrid regimes such as Nigeria and Turkey, elections play an important part in confirming the authority of the ruler: explicit vote-rigging is avoided, and the possibility of a low turnout, and even defeat, cannot be dismissed. Nigeria has passed several telling milestones in recent years, that – if sustained – indicate a welcome trend towards more democracy. Not only is it currently in its longest uninterrupted period of civilian government (since 1999), but in 2007 it witnessed its first peaceful transfer of power from one administration to another (the incumbent had run up against term limits and could not run again), and in 2015 it experienced the first ever defeat of an incumbent president running for re-election. All this in a country that has been independent since 1960. Unfortunately, Nigeria's elections are also surrounded by high levels of violence, fed by ethnic and religious polarization, with problems ranging from voter intimidation to communal violence, mass protests, bomb blasts directed at party gatherings, and even the assassination of candidates (Angerbrandt, 2018).

During elections campaigns in hybrid regimes, what is sometimes known (in sub-Saharan Africa, at least) as 'big man politics' comes into play as the leading figure dominates media coverage (men tend to dominate the electoral field, particularly for executives), using television to trumpet his sometimes real achievements in office. In contrast to authoritarian regimes, the emphasis in hybrids is as much on the carrot (providing reasons for voting for the dominant figure) as on the stick (threatening opposition supporters). Even if there has been progress with multi-party elections in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, though, such elections can create their own problems when – as we saw in Chapter 13 – there is an outbreak of violence during campaigns or following disputed results (Kovacs and Bjarnesen, 2018).

When it comes to voter turnout in authoritarian regimes, reliable data are hard to find because of the problem of manipulated results. When dead people are listed as having voted, sometimes several times, we can be sure that there has been electoral fraud. Another indicator of manipulation, though, is easy to spot: unrealistically high turnout figures and winning margins. Few outcomes so patently pushed the boundaries of credibility as the claim by Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein that he won the 2002 election (actually, a referendum) with 100 per cent support on 100 per cent turnout. A more recent example is equally unlikely: the victory of President Teodoro Obiang in the 2022 election in Equatorial Guinea, winning 97 per cent of the vote with 98 per cent turnout. Such implausible figures can be seen as an expression and reinforcement of the powers of dictators, which include the capacity to prevent anyone from contradicting turnout numbers and election results.

Where dependable independent data are available, and the numbers are more realistic, turnout in authoritarian regimes is often comparable with that in democracies. Based on polls asking people if they had voted at the most recent election, for example, de Miguel et al. (2015) found that turnout in seven Arab countries (Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, Lebanon, Palestine, and Yemen) ranged between 51 and 72 per cent, with an average of 61 per cent. It would be reasonable to ask why voters make the effort to turn out, given the combination of their probable cynicism about the process and their distance from the interests of the elites. De Miguel et al. (2015) reject the standard view of elections in the region as purely patronage contests, arguing instead that voters also care about policy and use elections to express their views about the regime and its performance, particularly on the economy. 'Positive evaluations of economic performance,' they conclude, 'lead individuals to have more positive overall evaluations of the regime, which in turn increases the likelihood of voting.'

Elections everywhere are imperfect because of the challenges involved in translating votes cast into seats won. In democratic regimes, there is at least a good-faith effort to allow voters to choose their representatives, and to try and convert voter numbers accurately into legislative numbers. In authoritarian regimes, meanwhile, it is the ruling regime that makes the choices, using voters as a screen to give the impression of choice. The problems are accentuated by the often-audacious manner in which elections and their results are manipulated in the interests of ruling regimes.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Is there such a thing as a perfect electoral system?
- What is the best electoral system for choosing (a) a legislature, and (b) a president, and why?
- Is it irrational to vote?
- Low voter turnout: good or bad?
- Compulsory voting: good idea or bad idea?
- Why do authoritarian regimes hold elections?

KEY CONCEPTS

- Ballot stuffing
- Distribution requirements
- Electoral authoritarianism
- Electoral formula
- Electoral fraud
- Electoral system
- Initiative
- Mandate
- Proportional representation
- Referendum
- Single-member plurality
- Voter turnout

FURTHER READING

Arzheimer, Kai, Jocelyn Evans, and Michael S. Lewis-Beck (eds) (2017) *The Sage Handbook of Electoral Behaviour* (SAGE). An edited collection of studies of electoral behaviour, including sections on institutional and sociological approaches, how voters make decisions, and the role of issues.

Cheeseman, Nic, and Brian Klaas (2018) *How to Rig an Election* (Yale University Press). A study of the ways in which authoritarian leaders undermine the electoral process in order to guarantee their continued hold on power.

Herron, Erik S., Robert J. Pekkanen, and Matthew S. Shugart (2018) *The Oxford Handbook of Electoral Systems* (Oxford University Press). An edited collection on the structure and effects of different electoral systems, including individual chapters on elections in 18 different countries.

James, Toby S., and Holly Ann Garnett (eds) (2021) *Building Inclusive Elections* (Routledge). A study of the ways in which elections can be made more fair by reducing inequalities in the electoral process.

Morel, Laurence, and Matt Qvortrup (eds) (2018) *The Routledge Handbook to Referendums and Direct Democracy* (Routledge). An edited collection of studies of referendums and their political effects in different parts of the world.

Solijonov, Abdurashid (2016) *Voter Turnout Trends Around the World* (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance). A short report from a Stockholm-based research centre, packed with data and analysis on recent turnout trends and their possible meaning.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Visit **bloomsbury.pub/comparative-government-and-politics-13e** to access additional materials to support teaching and learning.

SPOTLIGHT 14
UNITED STATES

PROFILE

As the world's pre-eminent economic and military power, the United States has both driven and been deeply affected by the global changes of the last few decades. During the Cold War, it led the Western alliance against the Soviet Union and its clients, and was seen as the political, economic, and military leader of the 'free world'. Today it must use its continuing strengths to confront a more complex set of international challenges, including climate change, infectious disease, Russian belligerence, rising competition from China, and questions about the health of the rules-based international order. It must do this against a domestic background of deep political divisions, a record national debt, racial tensions, decaying infrastructure, an expanding gap between rich and poor, and concerns over immigration. Problems in the functioning of government recently earned the United States a downgrading on the Democracy Index from a full to a flawed democracy.

Form of government	Federal presidential republic consisting of 50 states and the District of Columbia. Independence achieved 1776, and most recent constitution adopted 1787.
Executive	Presidential. A president elected for a maximum of two four-year terms, supported by a vice president, an Executive Office of the President, a White House Office, and a federal cabinet.
Legislature	Bicameral Congress: lower House of Representatives (435 members) elected for renewable two-year terms, and upper Senate (100 members) containing two senators from each state, elected for renewable six-year terms.
Judiciary	A dual system of federal and state courts headed by the federal Supreme Court with nine members appointed by the president (and confirmed by the Senate) for life-time terms.
Electoral system	One of the few large countries still employing the single-member plurality method. Formally, the president is elected indirectly through an electoral college.
Parties	Two-party dominant. Multiple parties exist, but system dominated by conservative Republican Party and liberal Democratic Party (with many shades of opinion within each party).
Population	333 million
Gross Domestic Product	$25,440 billion
Per capita GDP	$76,330
Democracy Index rating	Flawed Democracy
Freedom House rating	Free
Corruption score	69/100
Human Development Index rating	Very High

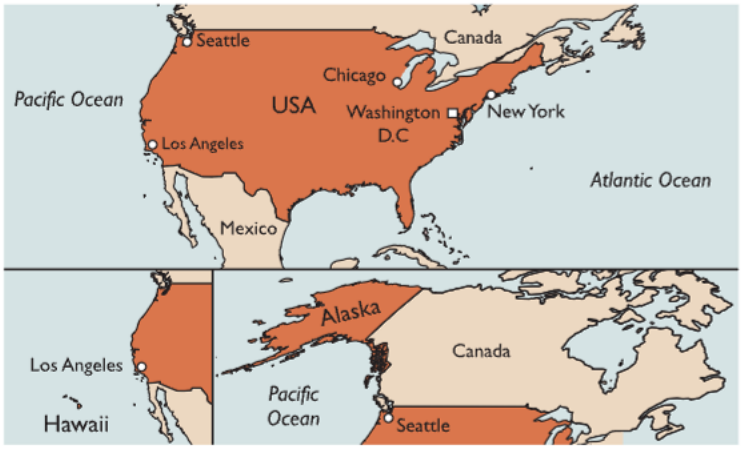
CASE STUDY: ELECTIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

Jessica Kourkounis / Stringer

A national political party convention in the United States. The time and money spent on US elections contrasts with the growing cynicism that many Americans show towards politics.

Elections in the United States are unusual (or even unique) in at least four ways. First, there is the sheer number of elected offices involved. Offices ranging from the president down through state governments to local judges and sheriffs are elected, reflecting not only the practical requirements of governing a large and one-time frontier society, but also a culture that emphasizes accountability. In addition, the distinctly American institution of primary elections (see Chapter 15) opens up the selection of a party's candidates to the general population.

Second, astonishing amounts of money are spent on campaigns. While these large amounts are no guarantee of electoral success, it is hard to make a mark on the American electorate without having access to large advertising budgets. The numbers have snowballed in recent elections, from $3 billion in the 2000 election season (all offices), to more than $5 billion in 2008, nearly $6.5 billion in 2016, and a record-shattering $14.4 billion in 2020 (Center for Responsive Politics, 2021). In the name of free speech, a 2010 Supreme Court ruling overturned some previous limits on campaign financing and allowed all but unlimited spending, often by groups protected by anonymity.



Third, an Electoral College is still used that converts the popular vote in presidential elections into numbers based on how many Congressional seats each state has, for a total of 535. Twice in recent years (George W. Bush in 2000 and Donald Trump in 2016) the candidate who won the Electoral College vote lost the popular vote, raising troubling questions about the character of American democracy.

The questions are deepened by the fourth distinctive quality of American elections: the phenomenon of gerrymandering, through which the majority political party in most states is allowed to draw Congressional electoral districts to suit and advantage itself. The result is skewed and manipulated election results, in which, it is often said, representatives choose voters rather than vice versa. Legal challenges are being mounted to gerrymandering, a test case occurring in the state of Pennsylvania in 2018 when it was ordered by the US Supreme Court to redraw its districts in order to make them less partisan.

Further reading

Barbour, Christine, and Gerald Wright (2023) *Keeping the Republic: Power and Citizenship in American Politics*, 10th edn (Sage).

Goddard, Joseph, and Russell Duncan (2022) *Contemporary United States*, 6th edn (Palgrave).

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15

Political parties

CONTENTS

- Understanding political parties
- Origins and evolution
- Party systems
- Party organization
- Political parties in authoritarian regimes

PREVIEW

For many people, political parties are the channel through which they most often relate to government. Parties offer them competing sets of policies, encourage them to take part in the political process, and are often the key determinant of who governs, and who does not. It is all the more ironic, then, that while parties are so central to the political process, they are not always well regarded by citizens. They are often seen less as a means for engaging citizens than as self-serving channels for the promotion of the interests of politicians, and as causes of political division; as a result, support for parties is declining as people seek other channels for political expression. In authoritarian regimes the story is even unhappier: parties have routinely been the means through which elites manipulate public opinion, and they have been both the shields and the instruments of power.

This chapter begins with a survey of the origins and changing roles of parties, before looking at the variety of party systems around the world, ranging from states where parties are not allowed through single-party, dominant party, and two-party systems to the multi-party systems found in most democracies. It reviews the dynamics of parties in these different systems, then looks at how parties are organized and financed, and at how leaders and candidates are recruited. The chapter concludes with a review of the roles parties play in authoritarian systems, where – in contrast to providing choice and guiding voters – they are usually a means of control.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Political parties have five core roles, including providing a foundation for governments, guiding and mobilizing voters, and aggregating political interests.
- Political parties were once key agents of society and forces for political mobilization, but disillusion with their impact and political role has grown.
- Party systems come in several different forms, the major theme being the decline of dominant party and two-party systems, and the rise of multi-party systems.
- The organization of parties mainly revolves around choosing leaders, choosing candidates, and managing finances.
- The growth in public funding of parties has changed their political role and their character.
- The roles of parties in authoritarian regimes include resolving conflict, balancing threats, managing elections, extending influence, and educating voters.

UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL PARTIES

Few countries have seen quite so much recent change in the line-up of their political parties as France, where parties often exist less to offer alternative policy platforms than to act as a foundation for presidential candidates. One of the more notable changes began in 2016 with the foundation of a new centrist party called La République en Marche! (loosely translated as 'The Republic on the move!', but usually shortened to En Marche!, which can be translated as 'Forward!' or 'Onward!'). This was created by Emmanuel Macron, the incumbent economics minister, who was making plans to run for the presidency in 2017. With a pro-business, pro-European Union platform, Macron swept to victory in the second round of the presidential election, becoming the youngest president in French history, and En Marche! won a majority in the National Assembly a month later, giving Macron a mandate for change. As with so many political candidates who have promised change, though, Macron found his promises hard to keep, and his standing in opinion polls fell, but he was still able to win a second term in 2022, soon after which his party was renamed Renaissance.

Although they are much newer that the formal institutions of government, and are not themselves a formal part of government, **political parties** have – for better or for worse – become central to the functioning of most political systems. Their roles range from providing the foundations of government (the stability of which often depends on party numbers in legislatures), to helping guide voters through the complexities of government, to aggregating interests, encouraging public participation, and recruiting candidates for office (see Figure 15.1). Although they are not as popular as they once were, and are often criticized for creating and encouraging partisan divisions in public life, it is hard to imagine what would replace them if they could somehow be abolished.

Political party: A group identified by name and ideology that fields candidates at elections in order to win public office and control government.

Parties are strongest in those authoritarian regimes where they have a monopoly on power and are exploited as a tool of the ruling elite. In these situations, their job is less to aggregate interests and to offer choices than to act as a means by which authoritarian leaders can build, keep, and wield their power. In countries that are poor and ethnically divided, parties typically lack the ideological contrasts

Role	*Features*
Government	Providing a foundation for the exercise of power by governments.
Guidance	Giving voters contrasting sets of policies from which to choose.
Aggregation	Pulling candidates and representatives into groups with shared labels, policies, and goals.
Mobilization	Encouraging citizens to take part in politics by campaigning, raising funds, or voting.
Recruitment	Recruiting, preparing, and supporting candidates for public office.

Figure 15.1 Political parties in democratic regimes

that provide the base of party systems in most democracies, and have instead come to be identified with the interests of one social group over another. In some cases, such as Oman and Saudi Arabia, they are not allowed to function at all.

In democratic regimes, meanwhile, parties lie at the heart of democratic choice, although important changes have been happening to the ways in which voters relate to them. At the core of the discussion is the concept of **party identification**, which means not so much enthusiastic support for a party as an inclination to support that party. Just as regularly buying a particular brand of mobile phone or road vehicle short-circuits the need to make a full-scale assessment of a new model and all its options with every purchase, so voting for a given party can be a standing commitment which precludes the need to test alternatives at each election.

Party identification: Long-term attachment to a particular political party, which helps provide voters with a road map through the world of politics.

For many, voting for a given party is a pragmatic, long-term brand choice, and in few cases is this as true as in the United States. Thanks to a combination of the distinctive features of the American political system – including an entrenched two-party system, closed party primaries, and the ability to vote a straight party ticket for a large number of elected offices – the electorate between 1994 and 2023 could be divided consistently into three approximately equally sized groups: those identifying with the Democrats, those identifying with the Republicans, and those identifying as independents (Pew Research Center, 2023). (To be sure, though, only about 30–40 per cent of Americans consider themselves to be *strong* party identifiers (American National Election Studies data quoted in Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2020).)

In Europe, the old ties between class, religion, and politics have weakened, a wider range of issues have come into play, and Europeans have a greater range of parties from which to choose, meaning more opportunity to move from one to another. As a result, the bonds between voters and parties have changed in a process known as **partisan dealignment**. This is reflected in a fall in the proportion of voters identifying with any party, a decline in the strength of party loyalty, and higher rates of electoral volatility. The writing has long been on the wall, argues Goodwin (2018), and the changes will continue, making it 'harder for Europe to get the strong, stable, and ideologically coherent governments that are a prerequisite for dealing effectively with a growing list of challenges'.

Partisan dealignment: The weakening bonds between voters and parties.

In one recent study of 19 advanced industrial democracies for which there are long-term survey data, 17 were found to have seen a decrease in the percentage of partisans, as well as a decrease in the strength of partisanship (Dalton, 2020). Britain is a striking example. Between 1983 and 2012, the proportion of voters identifying with a party fell from 87 to 72 per cent. This may not seem very much, but over the same period the strength of support (the number of people with 'very strong' or 'fairly strong' support for a party) also fell, support for parties became more clearly defined by age (Labour on the left attracted more younger voters, while the Conservatives on the right attracted more older voters), and the number of people willing to change their minds between elections grew (Curtice and Simpson, 2017; Lee and Young, 2013). By the time of the 2019 general election, surprising shifts in support for the major parties suggested that the old idea of party alignment had even further weakened.

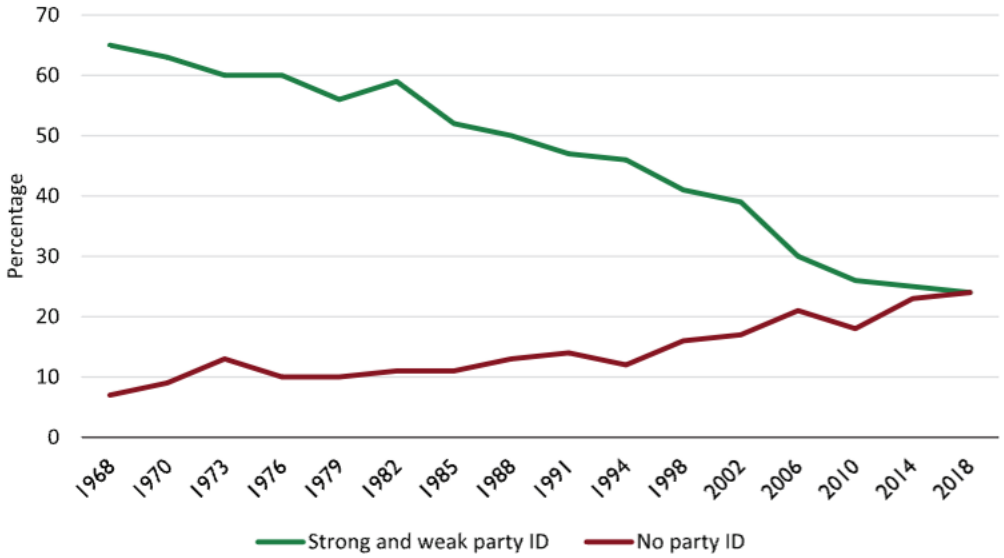

Figure 15.2 Partisan dealignment in Sweden

Source: Based on Swedish National Election Studies data quoted in Holmberg and Oscarsson (2020).

Comparable changes can be seen in Sweden. As shown in Figure 15.2, the number of Swedes with strong or weak party identification fell between 1968 and 2018 from 65 per cent to 24 per cent, while the number with no party identification rose from 7 per cent to 24 per cent. Among the explanations: the relatively low levels of political polarization in Sweden, the effect of low levels of political knowledge (voters with higher levels of knowledge have higher party identification), and the effect of an ageing population (partisan ties become weaker as Swedes grow older).

What has caused these changing views about parties? Although analysis within a country often concentrates on national influences, comparison across borders points to a common set of sociological and psychological factors (summarized in Figure 15.3). Sociologically, the weakening of historic social divisions,

Factor	*Trend*
Reduced social divisions	Declining class and religious differences have led to weakening party loyalty.
Improved education	Educated voters can interpret events with less need for party cues.
Diversification	Voters have drifted away from parties towards different channels of political participation, such as digital activism.
Policy convergence	Seeking to increase their share of the political market, many mainstream parties have become less distinct in their policies.
Disillusionment	Anti-establishment sentiments, and reduced trust in parties in the wake of scandals and corruption.

Figure 15.3 Causes of partisan dealignment

the changing place of religion, and the expansion of education have contributed to a thinning of political identities. Psychologically, meanwhile, there have been several factors at work: a diversification of channels of participation away from party membership (as discussed in Chapter 13 and again in Chapter 16, where we look at support for interest groups), reduced differences in the sets of policies offered by parties, the growth of anti-establishment populist parties drawing on disillusionment among sections of the population, and the effects of declining voter trust in the wake of party scandals and corruption.

ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

The history of political parties is shorter than we might suppose, their origins dating back only as far as the nineteenth century. In Western Europe, mass parties were founded to compete for the votes of growing electorates. In the first half of the twentieth century, ruling parties in communist and fascist states monopolized power in an attempt to reconstruct society. Later, in the developing world, nationalist parties became the vehicle for driving colonial rulers back to their imperial homelands. By the end of the twentieth century, parties had become a feature of almost every political system, although the number and the array of parties was often different, as was their relationship with leaders and voters.

Cadre party: An early type of political party made up of elites, with a loose organization and limited interest in expanding its membership.

Mass party: A type of political party drawing in large numbers of people who had not yet been much represented in politics, and funded by its members.

Political cleavage: The emergence of groups of voters displaying similar electoral preferences based on national ethnic, religious, linguistic, or social differences.

Catch-all party: A political party that works to attract voters with a wide variety of political views and ideologies.

The earliest parties were mainly one of two types. The first was the **cadre party** (or elite party) formed by members within a legislature joining together around shared concerns but working only to appeal to a restricted membership within an enlarged electorate. Cadre parties were also sometimes known as 'caucus' parties, the label describing a closed meeting of the members of a party in a legislature. Such parties were committed to their leader's authority, with ordinary members playing a supporting role. Among the most prominent examples were the conservative parties of Britain, Canada, and the Nordic countries, and the first parties in the United States (the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans).

Later, **mass parties** were formed outside legislatures, based on **political cleavages** that helped different social groups win representation as a way of achieving their policy goals. Examples included the working-class socialist parties that spread across Western Europe around the beginning of the twentieth century. Mass parties built an enormous membership organized in local branches, and – unlike cadre parties – tried to keep their representatives under tight rein. They played an important role in political socialization and education, organizing workshops and running party newspapers, all designed to tie their members closer to the party.

As cadre and mass parties matured, so they tended to evolve into **catch-all parties**, a label developed by the German political scientist Otto Kirchheimer (1966) to describe parties with a wider base. They had jettisoned their original image as private factions, and instead of working as representatives of a social group, sought to govern in the national interest. Catch-all parties (otherwise

known as big-tent parties) looked for electoral support wherever they could find it, their purpose being to govern rather than to represent.

The classic case of the transition to catch-all status can be found in the changes that came to Christian Democratic parties in Europe. Tracing their origins to religious defence organizations, they evolved after World War II to become more general parties of the centre-right. Christian democracy supports social conservatism, liberal democracy, a mixed economy, the welfare state, European federalism, and a rejection of secularism. Another example can be found in the transformation of several mass socialist parties into leader-dominated social democratic parties, as in Spain and Britain. While most major parties in democracies now fit the definition of catch-all parties, their origins inside or beyond legislatures continue to influence party style, the autonomy of their leaders, and the standing of ordinary members. The association between political parties and ideologies has also changed along the way (see *Using Theory 15*).

A recent move in a different direction, notably in many European countries, has been the rise of the **niche party**, which is one that appeals to a narrower part of the electorate. These parties have been defined in several different ways: non-centrist or extremist, limited-issue or single-issue, parties that focus on a small number of non-economic issues, or parties that cut across traditional social cleavages and partisan alignments (see discussion in Wagner, 2012). The 'niche' is often ideological, producing parties with right-wing, nationalist, and/or populist agendas. Unlike many mainstream parties, they rarely succeed by moderating their position, instead doing best by exploiting their natural but limited support group. Several of these parties – including Austria's Freedom Party and Switzerland's People's Party – have taken part in coalitions, while others (such as the UK Independence Party in Britain) have succeeded in influencing the agenda of mainstream parties.

Niche party: A political party that appeals to a narrow section of the electorate, usually highlighting non-economic issues such as the environment.

Niche parties of the far right are an exception to the thesis that parties emerge to represent well-defined social interests. Evidence suggests that they draw heavily on the often-transient support of less educated and unemployed young men. Disillusioned with mainstream democracy and by the move of established conservative parties to the centre, this demographic is attracted to parties that blame immigrants, asylum seekers, and other minorities not only for crime in general, but also for its own economic and cultural insecurity in a changing world (Akkerman et al., 2016).

In few places has the rise of a niche party threatened business as usual as in Sweden. For decades, Swedes have had a reputation for internationalism, tolerance, and a generous welfare system. The main party on the centre-left has long been the Swedish Social Democrats, who routinely won about 40 per cent of the vote in general elections and which since 1932 has been in government for all but 16 years. Just as the share of the Social Democratic vote has fallen in recent years, though, from 35 per cent in 2006 to 28 per cent in 2018 (its lowest share since 1911), so support for the far-right Sweden Democrats – which has a populist, nationalist, and anti-immigrant platform – has grown, from less than 3 per cent in 2006 to just over 20 per cent in 2022. The effect has been to

USING THEORY 15

POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

Ideology: A system of connected beliefs, a shared view of the world, or a blueprint for how politics, economics, and society should be structured.

Ideas play a key role in politics, because political action is often motivated by the ideas that people hold about it. One way to understand this is via the notion of **ideology**. This is a term that was coined by the French philosopher Antoine Destutt de Tracy during the 1790s, in the aftermath of the French Revolution, to describe the science of ideas. Its meaning has long since changed, and although ideology is not a theory as such, it is related to theory in that it describes packages of ideas related to competing political philosophies. These are often found in political parties with different views about the role of government and the goals of public policy. An ideology is today understood as any system of thought expressing a view on human nature, the proper relationship between state and society, and the individual's position within this order (Baradat and Phillips, 2020).

Which specific political outlooks should be regarded as ideologies is a matter of judgement, but Figure 15.4 offers a selection. In any case, the era of explicit ideology beginning with the French Revolution ended in the twentieth century somewhere between the defeat of fascism in 1945 and the collapse of communism at the end of the 1980s. Intellectual currents such as environmentalism, feminism, and Islamism have become stronger, but it is debatable how far contemporary ideas, values, and priorities constitute ideologies in the classical sense.

Even though the age of ideology may have passed, we still tend to talk about ideologies, placing them – and the political parties with which they are associated – on a spectrum between left and right. The origins of this habit lie in revolutionary France, when – in the legislative assemblies of the era – royalists sat to the right of the presiding officer, in the traditional position of honour, while radicals and commoners sat to the left. To be on the right implied support for aristocratic, royal, and clerical interests, while being on the left implied support for a secular republic and civil liberties.

The words 'left' and 'right' are still commonly used to classify political parties, so that the left is associated with equality, human rights, and reform, while the right favours tradition, established authority, and pursuit of the national interest. The left supports policies to reduce inequality; the right is more accepting of natural inequalities. The left sympathizes with cultural and ethnic diversity; the right is more interested in national unity. Surveys suggest that most voters in democratic regimes can situate themselves as being on the left or right, even if many simply equate these labels with a particular party or class (Mair, 2009).

Although the terms *left* and *right* have travelled well throughout the democratic world, enabling us to compare political parties and programmes across countries and time, the specific issues over which these tendencies compete have varied, and the terms are better understood as labels for containers of ideas, rather than as well-defined ideas in themselves. The meaning of ideology has also changed as the focus of political science has broadened, and it is no longer as simple as it once was to place parties on a two-dimensional spectrum. The meaning of left and right has blurred, for example, as the goals of parties in the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa and Asia have broadened, and we now need to use multiple axes to understand parties, from liberal to authoritarian, from secular to religious, from establishment to anti-establishment, and from nationalist to multicultural.

Ideology	*Features*
Anarchism	All forms of governmental authority are unnecessary, and society is best structured around voluntary cooperation and free association.
Communism	Elimination of private property will lead to the creation of a classless, non-exploitive, and self-governing society.
Socialism	Natural resources and the means of production should be owned and administered collectively or by government, and output shared equally throughout the population.
Liberalism	Individuals are the best judges of their own interests. Advocates a tolerant society which maximizes personal freedom, and favours a government which is limited but freely elected.
Conservatism	Traditional institutions and practices work best, the free market is the most efficient at meeting societal needs, and government should be as decentralized as possible.
Fascism	National unity should be achieved through strong leadership, mass mobilization, and an emphasis on nationalism and militarism.

Figure 15.4 Major ideologies: six examples

open rifts in the landscape of Swedish party politics and to raise questions about how much longer Sweden can continue to sustain its reputation for progressive thinking.

In some ways, political parties have gone too far. No longer are they always energetic agents of society, seeking to bend the state towards the interests of their supporters. Instead, they have moved closer to becoming part of the state itself. They are also often seen by their critics as being less concerned with offering

HENRIK MONTGOMERY / Contributor

Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson (Social Democrats) and Moderate Party leader Ulf Kristersson give a joint press conference on Swedish membership of NATO in May 2022. A few months later, a general election resulted in a rare setback for the Social Democrats when Kristersson was able to form a minority government and become prime minister.

voters alternatives than with promoting their own interests (and the interests of their leaders) and pursuing power for its own sake. As a result, political parties have lost much of their attraction to the politically engaged, who seem to be increasingly disillusioned with achieving democracy through competing party choices.

PARTY SYSTEMS

Party system: The configuration and patterns of interaction among political parties, based on factors such as their number, variety, relative importance, states of discipline, degrees of polarization, interactions, and the laws that regulate them.

The best way of comparing and understanding political parties is to locate them within contrasting **party systems**. Multiple efforts have been made to categorize parties, the earliest of which – by Duverger (1951) and by Sartori (1976) – were limited by the smaller number of cases that existed at the time. Changes since then have generated variations on the theme of five main types: no-party, one-party, dominant party, two-party, and multi-party (summarized in Table 15.1). The development of different systems varies by time and place, making it difficult to offer generalizations beyond the conclusion that the more open and democratic a political system, the more likely there is to be a greater variety of parties, and an alternation in party or parties holding power. By focusing on the number, variety, and roles of parties, the structure of a party system helps us understand how they interact with one another, and how their interactions impact the countries they govern. At the same time, though, it is important to understand that the distinctions between types are not always clear-cut, and that party systems change and evolve.

No-party systems

There are a small number of authoritarian regimes – mainly in the Middle East – that either do not allow political parties, or where no parties have been formed. In the cases of Oman and Saudi Arabia, there is no legislature and the formation of parties is banned, although there are several movements in place that would evolve into parties if allowed, and Saudi Islamists made a largely symbolic request to the king in 2011 that they be allowed to form a party. In Iran, meanwhile, parties are allowed by the constitution (Article 26) 'provided they do not violate the principles of independence, freedom, national unity, the criteria of Islam, or the basis of the Islamic Republic'. Thanks in part to the different ways in which this phrase can be interpreted, Iranian parties are weak, and candidates for office and elected officials are distinguished from each other mainly by their different views about the role of Islam in public life. Conservatives, for example, believe in an uncompromising interpretation of what Islam means for politics (they follow a stricter line on social and cultural issues, for example, and favour an anti-Western foreign policy). Meanwhile, pragmatists or reformists believe that the values of Islam can be followed and respected while at the same time supporting a more open economy, a higher degree of cultural freedom, greater respect for political rights, and a more moderate line in foreign policy. take a more moderate line, placing a greater stress on political institutions and public opinion.

Table 15.1: Comparing party systems

Type	Features	Examples	Alternation
No-party	No formal political parties exist.	Iran, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates.	Impossible
One-party	Only one party matters. Any minor parties are strictly subordinate.	China, Cuba, North Korea, Laos, Vietnam.	Highly unlikely
Dominant party	One party is almost always in government, whether alone or in coalition.	Algeria, Egypt, Japan, Hungary, Russia, Singapore, South Africa, Syria, Tanzania, Turkey.	Unlikely
Two-party	Two major parties compete to form single-party governments.	Australia, UK, United States.	Regular
Multi-party	Three or more parties compete, often leading to government by a coalition or a minority party.	Most of Europe and Latin America, India, Nigeria.	Regular

One-party systems

These were once common, being found throughout the communist world as well as in most African and Arab countries. Today they are found only in the world's few remaining communist regimes, where the governing parties argue that they provide the answers to all needs, that alternative ideologies are moot, and that democracy exists within communist parties in a phenomenon dubbed 'democratic centralism' by Lenin. In truth, the party is anything but democratic: it is elitist, it is rife with corruption, and membership is restricted, offering a gateway to political influence and economic privileges to members, and marginalization to non-members.

In China, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is the source of all meaningful political decisions, controls all other political organizations, plays a key role in deciding the outcome of elections, and dominates both state and government. True, China allows eight 'democratic parties and groups' with alternative policy platforms to function, and – together with independents – they held about 29 per cent of the seats in the Fourteenth National People's Congress in 2023–28. The parties, however, are organized by the CCP, and their members and leaders are mainly selected by the CCP. The result is that policy changes come not through a change of party at an election or a substantial inter-party public debate, but rather through changes in the balance of power within the leadership of the CCP (see Lam, 2018).

Dominant party systems

In a dominant party system, variations of which are found in democratic and authoritarian regimes, one party outdistances all the others and becomes the repeated party of government. In authoritarian regimes such as Zimbabwe,

they are what Sartori describes as hegemonic parties in the sense that they control power to a degree that prevents opposition parties winning control of government; the hegemonic party remains in power whether it is popular or not, and an alternation of power is unlikely. In democratic regimes, meanwhile, they are predominant rather than hegemonic, and alternations of power are more likely: among the examples of parties that once dominated their countries but which have had to learn to share power are the Indian National Congress, Sweden's Social Democrats, Italy's Christian Democrats (dissolved in 2013), and the Institutional Revolutionary Party in Mexico; see *Spotlight 15* on Mexico at the end of this chapter.

In Japan, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has governed since 1955, except for breaks in 1993–96 and 2009–12. Although supposedly a united political party, it is made up of several factions, each with its own leader, and these factions provide a form of intra-party competition. During times of LDP rule, the prime minister is not necessarily the leader of the LDP, nor even the leader of the biggest faction, nor even the leader of *any* faction, but rather the person who wins enough support among the competing factions to form a government. The LDP has kept a grip on power for many reasons, including its association with Japan's post-war economic renaissance, an impressive network of grassroots supporter groups, and the inability of opposition parties to mount an effective challenge (see Hrebenar and Nakamura, 2016).

Another example of a dominant party is the People's Action Party (PAP) of Singapore, which is ranked as a flawed democracy. PAP has won every election in the city-state since independence in 1959, sometimes achieving a clean sweep of seats in parliament – and a supermajority – even with only a 70 per cent share of the vote. As if the dominance of the PAP was not enough, Singapore also has a family dynasty in power: Lee Kuan Yew was prime minister from 1959 until 1990, and his eldest son Lee Hsien Loong has been prime minister (and leader of the party) since 2004, winning his fourth straight election in 2020. Singapore is one of the world's wealthiest countries, the dominance of the PAP flying in the face of the general rule that wealth and democracy go hand in hand. Reyes (2015) ascribes the PAP's success to the national elections agency being part of the prime minister's office, an electoral system that leaves opposition parties with few resources, and state control of the media.

A younger example of a dominant party is South Africa's African National Congress (ANC). This party has multiple advantages, stemming not only from cultural memories of its opposition to apartheid and from its strong position among the black majority, but also from its use of office to reward its own supporters. There were seven sets of elections in South Africa between the end of the apartheid regime in 1994 and 2024, and in the first six of them the ANC never won less than 57 per cent of the vote, a remarkable achievement. However, factionalism and corruption have been growing problems, and the first signs of a threat to the ANC's supremacy emerged in 2024 when its share of the vote fell to just over 40 per cent.

Two-party systems

In a two-party system, two major parties of comparable size compete for electoral support, providing the framework for political competition while other parties exert less influence on the formation and policies of governments. The two major parties alternate in power, with one or the other usually enjoying a majority of seats in the legislature (if not necessarily a majority share of the vote at elections). Having said that, though, the two-party format is a dying breed.

The classic case is offered by Britain, where government has been controlled since the 1930s by either the Conservative Party or by the social democratic Labour Party. Except in elections won by the Conservatives in the 1930s, neither has typically won a majority of the vote, but the arithmetic of the plurality electoral system (see Chapter 14) means that one or the other typically wins a majority of the seats in Parliament. In the 2019 general election, the Conservatives won just under 44 per cent of the vote, which translated into a solid majority of 56 per cent of parliamentary seats.

The United States is another of the hold-outs, governed as it has been since 1860 by the Democrats and the Republicans. These two parties have also benefitted from the arithmetic of plurality electoral systems, as well as the ability – in most US states – to shape the borders of electoral districts to their benefit in a process known as gerrymandering (see *Spotlight 14* on the United States). Also, winning a US presidential election is a political mountain which can only be climbed by major parties capable of building a broad national coalition and of raising the astronomical funding needed to run a campaign. In the temple of free market economics, the two leading parties form a powerful duopoly.

Australia is another example, its two-party system again reinforced by a non-proportional electoral system. The centre-right Liberal Party and the social democratic Labor Party have consistently been the two biggest parties since World War II, winning 80–90 per cent of the seats in parliament between them. They have only been stopped from forming a US-style duopoly by the smaller conservative National Party, whose base lies in the rural areas, and which usually picks up about 5–7 per cent of the vote. Government in Australia has alternated between Labor governing alone and the Liberals governing in a permanent coalition with the Nationals.

Multi-party systems

These are by far the most common party systems found in democratic regimes, existing wherever several parties each win enough seats in the legislature to become contenders for a place in a governing coalition. For Sartori, they come in different degrees of fragmentation, ranging from the moderate (3–5 parties) to the polarized (6–8 parties) and the atomized (8 parties or more), the patterns of power alternation becoming more complex as the numbers become higher. The underlying dynamic is that political parties represent specific social groups (or opinion constituencies such as Greens) in divided societies. The legislature then serves as an arena of conciliation, with coalitions forming and falling in response to often minor changes in the political balance. Europe exemplifies

Table 15.2: Europe's major party families

Position	Examples
Left	France Unbowed, Syriza (Greece), New Left (Poland), Sumar (Spain), Left Party (Sweden).
Green	Greens (Austria, Belgium, Sweden), Green League (Finland), Alliance '90/The Greens (Germany).
Social Democrat	Social Democrats (Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Sweden), Socialists (France), Sinn Féin (Ireland), Democratic Party (Italy), Democrats 66 (Netherlands), Spanish Socialist Worker's Party, Labour (Norway, UK).
Centre	Centre Party (Finland, Norway, Sweden), Renaissance (France), Free Democrats (Germany), New Democracy (Greece), Fianna Fáil (Ireland), Liberal Democrats (UK).
Liberal	Venstre (Denmark), People's Party (Netherlands), Civic Platform (Poland), Moderates (Sweden).
Christian Democrat	People's Party (Austria, Spain), Christian Democratic Union (Germany), Fine Gael (Ireland), Forza Italia (Italy).
Conservative	National Coalition Party (Finland), Republicans (France), Conservative Party (UK, Norway).
Right	Freedom Party (Austria), Finns Party (Finland), National Rally (France), Alternative for Germany, Fidesz (Hungary), Brothers of Italy, Party for Freedom (Netherlands), Law and Justice (Poland), Sweden Democrats, Vox (Spain).
Regional	Christian Social Union (Bavaria), New Flemish Alliance (Belgium), Scottish National Party, Catalonian and Basque parties (Spain).

the phenomenon, most countries in the region having parties drawn from some, but not all, of nine major party families (see Table 15.2, and *Exploring Problems 15* for the question of how many parties are enough).

A good example is offered by Denmark, where no party has held a majority in the unicameral legislature (the Folketing) since 1909. The country's complex party system has been managed through careful consensus-seeking but – as in Sweden – this practice has come under pressure from the rise of new parties. In an explosive election in 1973, three new parties won representation and, since then, at least seven parties have won seats in the legislature, rising to a dozen by 2022. The centre-right 'Blue' coalition that followed the 2015 election comprised five of these, controlling 90 seats, or just five more than the opposition five-party 'Red' coalition. In 2019, power returned to parties on the moderate left, with a five-party coalition led by the Social Democrats. In 2022, the focus shifted yet again with the formation of a centrist government in which the Social Democrats relied on support from the more conservative Venstre party. Along the way, Denmark has moved from Sartori's definition of moderate fragmentation to atomization.

Brazil takes the idea of atomization to an extreme, with no less than 30 parties having won seats in the 2018 elections to the Chamber of Deputies,

EXPLORING PROBLEMS 15

WHAT IS THE IDEAL NUMBER OF POLITICAL PARTIES?

Reading through this chapter, it probably does not take long to realize that political parties have developed in many different ways, that they play different roles in government, that they are viewed with mixed opinions by citizens, and that their power and influence is not always a reflection of the amount of support they have among voters. While it could be argued that – under the right set of circumstances – we could perhaps do away with them altogether, most of us would probably agree that they are an inevitable and mainly useful part of government and politics.

On the one hand, they help us better understand the political choices before us, provide us with a handy way of labelling representatives and leaders, and mainly do a good job of educating and mobilizing voters. On the other hand, they are also adept at manipulating government and politics, lie at the heart of the partisan disagreements that so often split society (perhaps even leaving members of the same family unwilling to talk to each other), are often more interested in pursuing power for their own ends rather than in the public interest, and encourage elitism.

For better or for worse, we seem to be saddled with them. It is telling that the only countries without political parties are those authoritarian regimes (like Saudi Arabia) where they have been banned, or where (as in China and North Korea) all but the official governing party are kept out of the mainstream of government and politics. The implication here is that, given free choice, and allowing political nature to take its course, parties will always grow and flourish.

Given that parties are probably unavoidable, consider the following questions about the optimum number:

- What does the case of the United States tell us about the pros and cons of a two-party system?
- Is the model of Denmark (no majority governments since 1909 but a long history of stable coalition government) achievable elsewhere, or is it too particular to the Danish context?
- Is the Mexican model of three approximately equally balanced parties one to emulate?
- Is there, in short, such a thing as a Goldilocks party system, or does every society have its own best way of relating to political parties?

representing a wide range of opinions and interests. Seventeen parties each had ten or fewer members, and the pro-government coalition contained just three parties that together controlled 15 per cent of the seats. The picture in Brazil is complicated by a widespread aversion to right-wing parties (stemming from the heritage of Brazil's years under military control), weak discipline within many of the smaller parties, and the powerful role played by other actors, such as state governors. The result is a system that has been labelled 'coalition presidentialism', describing presidents who must rely on unstable coalitions to pass legislation (Gómez Bruera, 2013).

Two important elements of multi-party systems in several countries are the niche parties (discussed earlier) that operate outside traditional party divisions, and parties that operate only at the regional level, or at the state level in federations. In the latter case, Britain – for example – has parties that are active only in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, while the German Christian Democratic Union is in a sustained coalition with the Christian Social Union, which operates only in the state of Bavaria. Few countries offer a more varied array of regional parties than India, where such parties now play an expanded role in national politics. For example, the United Progressive Alliance coalition led by the Congress party relied heavily after the 2009 elections on regional parties in the states of West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra. Even when the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party won majorities in the 2014 and 2019 elections, it continued to head a coalition originally formed in 1998, which includes several regional parties.

PARTY ORGANIZATION

Large political parties are multi-level organizations, with hierarchies ranging from the party leadership and major funders down through research departments to volunteers working at national, regional, and local levels. This complexity means that while references to 'the party' as a single entity are unavoidable, the idea of party 'organization' is sometimes too grand a term. As we saw in Chapter 1, challenges have been made to the long-standing argument made by the scholar Robert Michels that even organizations with democratic pretensions tend to become dominated by a ruling clique. Some authors have even drawn a comparison between parties and franchise organizations such as McDonald's (Carty, 2004). In a franchise structure, the centre sets policy priorities, manages the brand, runs marketing campaigns, and supports the operating units. Local agents are left to implement key tasks, such as choosing candidates and running election campaigns at the local level. The decentralization that has often taken place in democratic parties becomes more clear when we look at the three main parts of the 'organization' in *party organization*: choosing leaders, choosing candidates, and managing finances.

Choosing party leaders

The means by which party leaders are chosen is important, for the obvious reason that major party leaders in most parliamentary systems stand a good chance of becoming prime minister. (This is not always the case though: in many continental European countries, the chair of the party is not allowed to be the party's nominee for the top post in government, while in the United States the chair of a party's national committee and its nominee for the presidency are always different people.)

The traditional method in several parliamentary systems, including Australia, Denmark, and New Zealand, is for party leaders to be chosen by members of the party in the legislature. In other cases, party members are also involved. This is true, for example, with the Conservative Party in Britain, which gives its

members a choice between two candidates chosen by the parliamentary party. Although this would seem to be the more democratic option, it can lead to problems when the membership is out of step with the national party. Consider also, the implications of the arithmetic involved: when Theresa May stepped down as prime minister and party leader in 2019, her successor – Boris Johnson – was chosen in an internal vote involving the 160,000 members of his party, who represented 0.23 per cent of the population of Britain.

Choosing candidates

When it comes to selecting candidates for elections, there are several options available, ranging from inclusive (an open vote of the entire electorate) to exclusive (selection by the party leadership). Reflecting the complexity of party organization, the nomination process is usually decentralized; a few parties give control to the national leadership, but even here the leaders usually choose from a list generated at lower levels. More often, local parties are the active force, either acting autonomously or making nominations to be ratified at national level.

The nomination task is limited by three features of most democratic political systems:

- *Incumbency*: sitting members of a legislature typically have an advantage over candidates challenging them in an election.
- *The rules for running*: only citizens can be candidates, for example, and many parties – as we saw in Chapter 9 – have adopted gender quotas.
- *The electoral system used*: choosing candidates for individual districts in a plurality system is a more decentralized task than preparing party lists in countries that use proportional representation.

The United States has gone furthest in opening up the selection process. There, **primary elections** allow a party's supporters to choose their candidates for a particular office, ranging as high as the presidency. In the absence of a tradition of direct party membership, a 'supporter' is generously defined in most states as anyone who declares an affiliation to that party, and can thereby take part in a closed primary that is limited to a party's registered supporters. The holding of an open primary extends the choice still further: to any registered voter. Although primaries are theoretically democratic, turnout in primaries is often low, and they can result in candidates being chosen who have more extreme political views than the mainstream of the party.

Primary election: One held before a general election, allowing voters to decide who will run in the name of parties at the general election.

Managing finances

Being a member of a political party was once an important means of taking part in politics, but – as we saw in Chapter 13 – this is no longer the case, and falling levels of party membership have meant reduced income for parties at a time when expenses (not least for election campaigns) are rising. As a result, the problem of funding for political parties has become significant. Should members, donors, or the state pay for their work? Should private donations be encouraged (to increase funds and encourage participation) or restricted (to

maintain fairness and reduce scandals)? Do limits on contributions and spending interfere with free speech?

In the main, the battle for public funding has been won. State support for national parties is now all but universal in democracies. On a global level, research by the Swedish-based International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2020) has found that more than two-thirds of the countries for which data are provided supported the public funding of parties in 2020; the exceptions included Egypt, India, Iran, Italy, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, and the Philippines. State subsidies have also developed quickly in the newer democratic regimes of Eastern Europe, where party memberships are far smaller than in the West.

There are costs and benefits involved with the public funding of parties. On the positive side of the ledger, it helps create a level playing field for parties, and decreases the opportunities for corruption. On the negative side, public funding reduces the incentive for parties to attract members, tends to create parties that serve the state rather than voters, and favours large, established parties. Some scholars have argued that the transition to public funding has led to a convergence of the state and major parties on a single system of rule. Governing parties, in effect, authorize subsidies for themselves, a process captured by Katz and Mair's idea (1995) of **cartel parties**: 'colluding parties become agents of the state and employ its resources to ensure their own survival'. The danger of cartel parties is that they become part of the political establishment, weakening their historic role as agents of particular social groups, and inhibiting the growth of new parties in the political market.

Cartel party: A leading party that exploits its dominance of the political market to establish rules of the game, such as public funding, which reinforces its own strong position.

POLITICAL PARTIES IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

This chapter began with a case study of political parties in France, a democratic regime with a long history both of party activity and of changes in its party system. The case of Afghanistan offers a notable contrast: although its first modern legislative elections were held in 1949, political parties – in terms of their legal and formalized role in the political system – date back no further than 2001 (Ibrahimi and Maley, 2020), and they did not survive the 2021 resurgence of the Taliban. Over that 20-year period, Afghans took part in several sets of legislative and presidential elections, contested by multiple parties, but all were surrounded by charges of fraud. The 2018 legislative elections were delayed for two years because of a dispute over electoral reforms, and parties played only a limited role in mobilizing voters or in helping them make their choices. The power of the Afghan presidency combined with the fragmentation of Afghan society, the lack of a tradition of party politics, and the ever-lengthening shadow of the Taliban to keep the country's nascent political parties firmly on the margins. With the return of the Taliban, parties were banned and elections placed on hold.

In contrast to their roles in democracies (including guidance, aggregation, mobilization, and recruitment), political parties in authoritarian regimes such as Afghanistan are usually a means of control, and neither a source of power in itself

nor a channel through which elections are contested, won, and lost. As Lawson (2013) writes, the party in a dictatorship 'is a shield and instrument of power. Its function is to carry out the work of government as directed by other agents with greater power (the military or the demagogue and his entourage)'. In doing this, the governing party often presents itself as pursuing a national agenda based on a key theme such as anti-imperialism, national unity, or economic development, but such messages are often a means of legitimizing power rather than a substantive commitment.

Despite this, parties are not completely without value in authoritarian regimes, and Geddes (2006) argues that in spite of the risks potentially posed to dictators by allowing parties to function, there are several roles they can play, ranging from conflict resolution to public education (see Figure 15.5). The long-term result is that what she describes as 'support parties' can prolong the political life not just of individual leaders but also of the regimes themselves. While that may be true as long as those leaders are still alive or still in office, though, once they have gone it is usually a different story. Based on her comparative study of dictatorships between 1946 and 2008, Meng (2021) concludes that ruling parties are not always as strong as they seem, and that while they may be the key to durable authoritarianism, they rarely survive the death or departure of the founding leader.

Consider these two examples:

- The Kenya African National Union (KANU) grew out of the movement that won Kenya's independence in 1963, and was the party of founding president Jomo Kenyatta and his successor Daniel arap Moi. It struggled against constitutional changes in the 1990s that replaced a one-party state with a competitive party system, failed to help Kenyatta's son Uhuru win the 2002 presidential election, and by 2022 held just five seats in the Kenyan parliament, a far cry from the late 1980s when it held almost 200 seats.

Role	*Features*
Conflict resolution	Helping solve intra-regime conflicts – or enforcing elite bargains – that might otherwise end or destabilize the rule of the dictator.
Balancing threats	Providing a counter-balance to other potential threats, notably the military.
Managing elections	Overseeing elections, distributing bribes to voters, and rewarding loyal members.
Extending influence	Extending the government's reach by organizing supporter networks throughout the country.
Education	Educating and socializing voters to support the regime's ideology and economic strategy.

Figure 15.5 Political parties in authoritarian regimes

- The United National Independence Party (UNIP) formed the first government of an independent Zambia in 1964, and held on to power – as did Zambian president Kenneth Kaunda – until 1990. Following riots and a coup attempt that year, free elections were held in 1991 at which Kaunda was defeated. He retired from politics, and while his son Tilyenji ran as the party's presidential candidate in 2011 and 2016, he won less than 1 per cent of the vote, and UNIP lost its last remaining seats in the National Assembly in 2011.

A variation on the theme of party weakness is found in Haiti, an authoritarian regime. Suffering at least as much from natural disasters (such as earthquakes) as from political problems, Haiti is currently working off its 23rd constitution since becoming independent in 1804. Such changeability is both a cause and an effect of Haiti's political difficulties, and its political parties suffer even less consistency than its formal political institutions. It has elections, but they are rarely fair or efficient. It has a long history of political party activity, but has never developed durable parties with deep social roots. Party activity is usually at its greatest during presidential election seasons, when new parties emerge around the campaigns of the leading candidates. These have represented a wide range of issues, from Haitian nationalism to communism, workers' rights, the interests of rural peasants, and opposition to the incumbent government. (One party, the Haitian Tèt Kale Party, even drew its name from the Haitian Creole term for 'bald-headed' in recognition of the baldness of its favoured presidential candidate, Michel Martelly (in office 2011–16).) Whatever their goals, Haitian parties rarely survive much longer than the terms in office of the leaders with whom they are associated.

As an interesting sidenote, it is far from true to say that no ruling party will survive a transition to democracy, and, in fact, there are multiple cases of what Loxton (2015) describes as 'authoritarian successor parties': those that once controlled an authoritarian regime but then became part of a new democratic regime. Examples include the Democratic Social Party of Brazil, the Democratic Justice Party of South Korea, the Partai Golkar that dominated the Indonesian legislature from 1971 until 1999, and Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party (which, as we will see in *Spotlight 15*, has survived and even prospered since giving up its near monopoly on political power in the late 1990s). Among the reasons proposed by Loxton for their successes: their inheritance of a party brand, of a territorial organization, of client networks, of sources of funding, and of a propensity for party members to hang together in times of change and crisis.

Turning back to authoritarian regimes, part of the explanation for the weakness of their ruling parties is that, unlike parties in democracies, they are rarely based on natural political cleavages or economic differences. Instead, they are either driven more by ethnic, religious, and local identities than by policy preferences, or else they revolve around the interests of leaders and ruling elites, and exist as a political platform to keep leaders or regimes in power rather than to provide voters with policy alternatives, or to represent the interests of groups of voters with shared values and preferences.

The links between identity and party politics are illustrated by the case of Nigeria. It had political parties before and after independence from Britain in 1960, but while some claimed to have a national base, others clearly had a regional base. Following independence, parties continued to work along regional or ethnic lines, leading to the collapse of two civilian governments in 1966 and 1983, and a suspicion in Nigeria's military governments that handing power back to the civilians would inevitably mean the resurgence of regionalism. Nigeria today has numerous parties that claim to have ideological rather than ethnic differences, dominated by the centre-left All Progressives Congress and the centre-rights People's Democratic Party. In an effort to avoid regionalism, the constitutional rules on the formation and operation of parties include a requirement that all parties be open to all Nigerian citizens, regardless of religion or ethnicity, and a prohibition on parties having names, symbols or logos that contain an 'ethnic or religious connotation or give the appearance that [their] activities … are confined to a part only of the geographical area of Nigeria'.

The role of parties as platforms to keep leaders or regimes in power is illustrated by the case of Russia, which would seem to have a wide range of political parties from which its voters can choose. However, few have developed either permanence or real influence, and polls reveal that they have become the least trusted public organizations in a suspicious society (Levada Centre, 2023). This is partly because a tradition has developed of a single dominant party forming the basis for the power of the regime, and acting as the vehicle rather than the driver of politics. At first, in the 1990s, there was a degree of competition, such that the 1996 presidential election had to go to a second round. Since then, though, the biggest party (Unity in 1999–2001, and United Russia since then) has opened up a commanding lead (see Figure 15.6). United Russia is what Russians term a

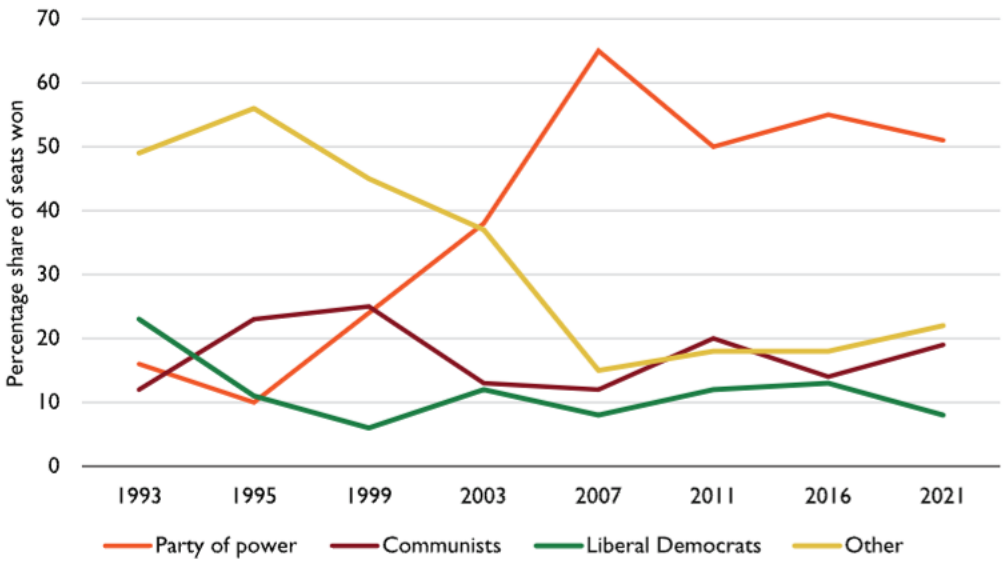

Figure 15.6 Trends in Russian legislative elections

Source: Based on data in Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (2023).

'party of power', meaning that the Kremlin uses threats and bribes to ensure that it is supported by powerful ministers, regional governors, and large companies.

Moving to sub-Saharan Africa, parties there are a puzzle in the sense that many seemingly similar countries have had very different records. Following independence in the 1950s and 1960s, the heroes of the nationalist struggles of many of these countries routinely put a stop to party competition, and one-party systems were established. The dominance of the official party was often justified in terms of the need to build national unity, even if it only served as the leader's personal vehicle. These single parties often proved weak, though, as we saw with the cases of Kenya and Zambia; they often lacked autonomy and cohesion, and rather than building unity they entrenched the control of the elites while excluding the political opposition.

In some cases, the problem with sub-Saharan African parties has been that they have attracted so much investment in time and effort that much less attention has been paid to other institutions. This has been the problem, for example, in Tanzania, a hybrid regime. Dominated for decades by a single party – Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM), or Party of the Revolution, which has won 70–75 per cent of the seats in the country's recent legislative elections – Tanzania was led between 2015 and his death in 2021 from Covid-19 by President John Magufuli. Chosen by the party as an outsider who was untainted by allegations of corruption, he at first seemed to be a reformer, paying unannounced visits to government offices to make sure that bureaucrats were at their desks, and firing officials on live television. However, he also cracked down on political opposition, and exploited his dual powers as president of the country and chair

PATRICK MEINHARDT / Contributor

Supporters of the Tanzanian ruling Party of the Revolution (Chama Cha Mapinduzi) gather at a stadium during campaigning for the 2020 national elections.

of CCM to remove opponents and appoint supporters to key positions. Thanks in part to the relative stability of the party as an institution, the actions of its leader were enough to undermine a tendency towards pluralism in Tanzania (*The Economist*, 2018).

Looking at political parties in the Middle East – and, more specifically, the Arab world – is a good way of moving out of the limitations imposed by studying parties only on the basis of their record in Western democracies. It shows that the spark behind the creation of parties is not always the same, that the appeal of parties is often different, and that the ideological spectrum often used to situate parties does not always apply. There are at least three qualities that make Arab parties distinctive or different (see Cavatorta and Storm, 2018):

- In many cases, they simply do not exist. Most of the no-party systems in the world are found in the Middle East, and specifically in the Arabian peninsula: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (all of which, not coincidentally, are authoritarian regimes).
- The party families found in the Arab world are significantly different from those found in Europe (as listed in Table 15.2). They include parties of the left, secular parties (a term which applies to almost all European parties), moderate Islamist parties, and Salafi parties. The latter are more conservative fundamentalist parties whose members once shunned engagement in institutional politics but whose positions have changed since the Arab Spring.
- Where a variety of sociological and psychological factors drive support for parties in most Western democracies, tribalism and clientelism play a dominating role in most Arab countries.

The study of parties in the Arab world is still in its infancy, and party politics in most countries in the region does not have deep societal roots. Despite this, argue Cavatorta and Storm (2018), parties (or their absence) are still important to understanding Arab politics, and to appreciating that local context matters when it comes to understanding parties. The case of Arab parties not only provides us with another reminder of how much about the field of government and politics remains to be studied, but how important it is to understand the field from multiple perspectives, and not just those of the European and American scholars who have for so long dominated political science.

The case of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) provides some insight into the nature of no-party authoritarian systems. A federation of seven emirates, it is governed by a Federal Supreme Council consisting of the seven hereditary emirs, one of whom is appointed by the others to serve as president for an unlimited number of five-year terms. The Council has both executive and legislative functions, meets quarterly, appoints a prime minister and cabinet, and operates more like a board of directors than a legislature. A 40-member Federal National Council – half of whose members are appointed, and the other half elected in non-partisan elections – can review proposed laws and question members of the cabinet. There are no parties or elections, the media are tightly controlled, the government lacks transparency, there are limits on freedom of

speech and assembly, there is no judicial independence, and foreign workers are often treated badly (Freedom House, 2023). Despite all this, the UAE is one of the least corrupt and most stable countries in the Middle East. Even if there were elections, it would be hard to know how to work around the problem of the UAE being home to a substantial number of foreign workers (about 85 per cent of the total population of 10 million) who could not vote.

Political parties are arguably a natural part of the political process, and in an open and democratic society they will almost inevitably emerge as voters with similar views work with one another to win control of government. Their importance is reflected in the way that they are either used to monopolize political control in authoritarian regimes, or occasionally banned altogether. Numerous questions arise, though, about the ideal number of parties, and about the extent to which choice within a single party is an effective substitute for choice among parties.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Do we need political parties? If so, what are the most valuable functions they perform?
- Which is best: a two-party system, or a multi-party system?
- Which type of party system exists in your country? Does it reflect social divisions, voter preferences, the structure of government, or something else?
- Is it more democratic and effective for parties to choose leaders and candidates themselves, or for the choice to be placed in the hands of voters?
- What is the fairest and most democratic means of financing political parties and election campaigns?
- What does a study of party systems in authoritarian regimes tell us about party systems in democratic regimes?

KEY CONCEPTS

- Cadre party
- Cartel party
- Catch-all party
- Ideology
- Mass party
- Niche party
- Partisan dealignment
- Party identification
- Party system
- Political cleavage
- Political party
- Primary election

FURTHER READING

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Lawson, Kay, and Jorge Lanzaro (eds) (2010) *Political Parties and Democracy* (Praeger). A five-volume edited collection looking at political parties in the Americas, Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Arab World.

Pettit, Robin T. (2014) *Contemporary Party Politics* (Palgrave). An assessment of party politics in democracies, looking at different party systems, party ideologies, party members, and the future of parties.

Riedl, Rachel Beatty (2014) *Authoritarian Origins of Democratic Party Systems in Africa* (Cambridge University Press). A study of parties in Africa, looking at the challenging transitions from authoritarianism to competitive party systems.

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Scarrow, Susan E., Paul D. Webb, and Thomas Poguntke (eds) (2017) *Organizing Political Parties: Representation, Participation, and Power* (Oxford University Press). An edited collection of studies of the way parties are organized in 19 democracies, including theories of how party organization affects political life.

ONLINE RESOURCES

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SPOTLIGHT 15
MEXICO

PROFILE

One of the powerhouses of Latin America, Mexico has undergone a programme of democratization since the 1990s that has resulted in a more competitive political landscape. Meanwhile, Mexico's economic reforms have brought greater freedom to a large emerging market and have broadened the economic base of one of the world's biggest oil producers. Unfortunately, the intertwined problems of corruption, party factionalism, and political centralization continue, as does the persistent gap between the rich and the poor, the effects made worse by a drug war since 2006 that has taken tens of thousands of lives. Political scientists are divided about how best to describe Mexico, their analyses peppered with terms such as *bureaucratic*, *elitist*, and *patrimonial*. For its growing problems, Mexico was downgraded in 2011 by Freedom House from Free to Partly Free, and in 2021 by the Democracy Index from a flawed democracy to a hybrid.

Form of government	Federal presidential republic consisting of 31 states and the Federal District of Mexico City. Independence achieved 1821, and most recent constitution adopted 1917.
Executive	Presidential. A president is elected for a single six-year term, and there is no vice president.
Legislature	Bicameral National Congress: lower Chamber of Deputies (500 members) elected for three-year terms, and upper Senate (128 members) elected for six-year terms. Members may not serve consecutive terms.
Judiciary	A Supreme Court of 11 members nominated for single 15-year terms by the president and confirmed by the Senate.
Electoral system	A straight plurality vote determines the presidency, while mixed member majoritarian is used for the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate: 300 single member plurality (SMP) seats and 200 proportional representation seats in the Chamber, and a combination of SMP, first minority, and at-large seats in the Senate.
Parties	Multi-party. Mexico was long a one-party system, but democratic reforms since the 1990s have broadened the field such that three major parties now compete at the national and state level, with a cluster of smaller parties.
Population	127 million
Gross Domestic Product	$1,465 billion
Per capita GDP	$11,496
Democracy Index rating	Hybrid
Freedom House rating	Partly Free
Corruption score	31/100
Human Development Index rating	High

CASE STUDY: POLITICAL PARTIES IN MEXICO

Mexico has seen a transformation in recent decades from a one-party dominant system to a more competitive multi-party system, with three major national parties now capable of winning the highest offices: a greater selection than is offered in the country's northern neighbour, the United States. Just how far this has moved Mexico along the road to a democracy is still questioned, however, as problems such as corruption and factionalism continue to interfere with its political development.

Medios y Media / Contributor

Claudia Sheinbaum becomes the second candidate from the relatively new MORENA party to win the presidency of Mexico in the 2024 presidential election, confirming the ongoing changes in the Mexican party system.

Between 1929 and 2000, power was all but monopolized by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which won every presidential election, held large majorities in both chambers of the National Congress, and won almost all state and local elections as well. It kept its grip on power by multiple means, including being a source of patronage, incorporating the major social and economic sectors in Mexico, mobilizing voters during elections, and overseeing the electoral process.

When economic problems began to grip Mexico in the 1990s, PRI could not blame the opposition. Mexicans were also becoming better educated and more affluent, with increasing demand for more choice in their political system. Changes to the rules were made that resulted in more competitive elections, as a result of which PRI lost its first national legislative elections in 1997, and lost the presidency for the first time in 2000, to the more conservative National Action Party (PAN).

Questions continue to be asked about the fairness of elections (Camp, 2020), but today Mexican voters have a wide array of political parties from which to choose, ranging across the political spectrum: PAN sits on the right, PRI straddles the centre, the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) sits on the left, and the cross-party National Regeneration Movement (MORENA) was founded in 2012 as a basis for the election campaign of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, otherwise known as AMLO. Against a background of public concerns about corruption, factionalism, and drug violence, AMLO won the 2018 election, and was succeeded in 2024 by Claudia Sheinbaum, also from MORENA and the first woman to serve as president of Mexico.

Further reading

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16

Interest groups

CONTENTS

- Understanding interest groups
- Origins and evolution
- Types and methods
- The dynamics of interest groups
- Interest groups in authoritarian regimes

PREVIEW

Interest groups (like political parties) are mainly founded and operate outside the formal structures of government. They have evolved separately, their main purpose being to influence the shaping of policy – and even sometimes to implement their own policies – without becoming part of government; this is another example of governance at work. They come in multiple types, and use different methods – both direct and indirect – to achieve their goals. A vibrant interest group community is usually a sign of a healthy civil society, but in cases where the influence of different interests is unbalanced, groups can encourage elitism and become a barrier to democracy.

This chapter begins with a survey of the work and the political roles of interest groups. It then looks at the origins and evolution of groups, critiquing the idea of pluralism, and contrasting the free marketplace of ideas with the privileged role that groups can come to play within the political process. It then assesses the channels of influence used by interest groups before looking at their dynamics and asking what gives particular groups the ability to persuade. The chapter then looks at the distinctive qualities and effects of social movements, before assessing the global state of civil society and discussing the place of interest groups in authoritarian regimes. There, they are typically seen either as a device through which the regime can maintain its control over society or as a non-political means for providing services and perhaps acting as agents of democratization.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Interest groups come in many shapes and sizes, with a wide variety of objectives, methods, and levels of influence.
- The work of groups is a critical part of civil society, a term describing the arena outside government within which citizens organize to address shared public problems.
- Interest group activity has a long history, although the more direct political roles of groups grew only with the expansion of democracy and pluralism.
- Most groups are either protective (focusing on the interests of their members) or promotional (focusing on wider interests), and they use a variety of direct and indirect channels to influence government and public opinion.
- The influence of groups varies according to their legitimacy, membership, resources, ability to use sanctions, and relationship to the state.
- Interest groups in authoritarian regimes are typically controlled and used as means of control, but they can also provide services in a non-political fashion.

UNDERSTANDING INTEREST GROUPS

In Japan, as in most wealthy democratic regimes, farming plays a greatly reduced role in the economy. Fewer than 2 million people (about 1.5 per cent of the population) still work in agriculture, which accounts for just over 1 per cent of the country's GDP, and owes much of its continued viability to government subsidies. Despite this, Japanese farming interests still exert heavy influence over national politics, as reflected in the work of the Japan Agricultural Cooperative (JA). This is an interest group that has parlayed its role in the marketing and distribution of agricultural products to ensure a steady stream of subsidies to its members, and to block government efforts to reduce tariffs on imports of rice, among other things. It has even helped keep Japan's programme of commercial whaling alive, even though only a small number of people in Japanese coastal communities still eat whale meat. Efforts have been made to reform JA, but they have achieved little, and Su (2019) argues that its influence continues to be 'toxic'.

The case of JA is just one example – albeit an important one – of the work of **interest groups**. Although they come in different sizes and use different methods, these bodies are united by their efforts to influence public policy from outside the formal structures of government. They do this mainly through **advocacy**: pursuing their political interests through a combination of direct pressure on policymakers and indirect pressure via the media and public opinion. They include among their number consumer groups, professional bodies, employer organizations, labour unions, single-issue groups, campaigning bodies, and charities, and although they work mainly at the national level, they also work locally and internationally. Like political parties, interest groups are a crucial channel of communication between people and government, especially in democracies. Unlike parties, though, they pursue focused concerns, working to shape government in multiple ways (see Figure 16.1) without becoming part of government.

Interest group: A body that works outside government to influence public policy. Also known as a pressure group, an advocacy group, or a non-governmental organization.

Advocacy: The process of supporting, promoting, or speaking on behalf of a cause or a proposal, usually directed at decision-making institutions.

Role	*Features*
Advocacy	Promoting the interests of groups and their members to government.
Education	Educating and informing the public, media, and policymakers about issues in which groups have an interest.
Influence	Working to influence public opinion and the media.
Mobilization	Encouraging members to participate in the political process.
Watchdog	Monitoring the work of government and blowing the whistle when they find problems.
Service provision	Providing services that either complement the work of governments, or fill gaps left by government.

Figure 16.1 Interest groups in democratic regimes

Interest groups are also sometimes known as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), although this term has different origins and is often applied differently from the way interest groups are understood. It was probably first used by the American diplomat Dwight Morrow (1919) to distinguish international organizations that had not been set up by states from those that had. It became more widely used after World War II when the UN Charter allowed for membership of NGOs in the UN's Economic and Social Council (Grant, 2018), and again the focus was on bodies that were international in reach. Since then, the term has been applied more widely, and is defined by the World Association of Non-Governmental Organizations (2024) as 'any not-for-profit organization that is not established by a governmental entity or intergovernmental agreement and which is organized on a local, national, sub-regional, regional, or international level'. This includes a wide array of bodies representing numerous different interests and using multiple methods.

Although many interest groups go about their work quietly, their activity is pervasive. Their staff can be found negotiating with bureaucrats over the details of proposed laws and regulations, pressing their case in legislative committee hearings, taking journalists out to lunch in their efforts to influence media coverage, launching direct action campaigns, or helping people in need. Collectively, they are a critical part of a healthy **civil society**: in an organized democratic regime, there is space and opportunity for citizens to identify shared problems and to address them directly and collectively without having to rely on government. The health of a democracy is reflected in part in the freedom of groups to organize and to work for change (although the need for interest groups can also be interpreted as reflecting the failure of government to address important issues, prompting citizens to step into the breach). By contrast, authoritarianism is reflected in limits on the work of interest groups and the absence of a healthy civil society.

Civil society: The arena outside government within which citizens engage with one another to address public problems of shared concern.

Worryingly, the threats posed to civil society seem to be deepening in democratic and authoritarian regimes alike, with Edwards (2020) warning that the increased division and fragmentation of communities, and the rise of intolerance and inequality, does not bode well for the theory or the practice of civil society. 'Authoritarians and populists of different stripes have gained a foothold even in advanced democracies,' he argues, and the public sphere has been 'privatized, commercialized, hollowed out and distorted by "filter bubbles" on social media and accusations of "fake news".' This has made it more difficult to address the resulting divisions and fragmentation.

No discussion of the work of interest groups would be complete without reference to **social movements** (see Table 16.1 for examples). These are typically more loosely organized than interest groups, they are often composed of people taking part for the first time in political activism, and in contrast to the institutionalized means used by groups (such as lobbying), social movements will often use non-institutionalized means to pursue their goals, such as marches, sit-ins, boycotts, and dramatic media events (see Almeida, 2019). At the same time, they often grow out of the work of interest groups, they will often work alongside groups, they may result in the creation of new groups (often described,

Social movement: A movement emerging from society to pursue non-establishment goals through non-institutionalized and often unconventional means.

Table 16.1: Social movements: some examples

Issue	Time and place	Focus
Fair trade	Since the 1960s, originally in Europe.	Higher prices and sustainable techniques for producers of commodities exporting from the developing to the developed world.
Chipko movement	1960s–80s, India.	Village- and rural-based protests against deforestation.
Landless workers	Since the mid-1980s, Brazil.	Land reform and access to land for the poor.
Anti-globalization	Since late 1980s, many countries.	Critical of the power of global corporate capitalism.
LGBTQ+ rights	Since the 1990s, mainly in advanced democracies.	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer rights.
Black Lives Matter	Since 2013, starting in US and spreading internationally.	Opposition to violence and racism directed at black people.
#MeToo	Since 2017, starting in US and spreading internationally.	Opposition to sexual abuse, harassment, and assault.

at least at first, as social movement organizations), they often borrow the techniques of interest groups, and – like interest groups – their goal is to influence government without becoming part of government. In fact, it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish the work of social movements from that of interest groups, particularly when we think about how many social movements – including feminism and environmentalism – were founded on the work of interest groups and spawned new ones.

ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

The origins of interest groups are hard to pin down, for the simple reason that for as long as there has been organized government, there have been groups of people who have worked together to influence decision-makers on their shared concerns. The earliest groups were created either to provide a service not yet addressed by government (such as helping the poor), or to bring together a group of people with shared interests who wanted to make a joint case to government. Individual citizens could press their case and try to influence political decisions, but it always made more strategic sense for them to do so as part of a group, and the bigger the group, the more likely government was to listen.

Among the first organizations set up to promote defined interests were the guilds of medieval Europe, most of them active between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries. The two main types were merchant guilds and craft guilds, made up, respectively, of the merchants and artisans in particular towns or cities. They set standards, worked to control prices, and influenced local government in order

to achieve their economic goals. Broader interests also occasionally generated cooperation, as reflected in the foundation in 1660 of the Royal Society of London, a national science academy set up to promote excellence in science, and that remains one of the oldest interest groups still in existence today (Davies, 2019).

The earliest interest groups of the modern era date back to the industrial revolution, and include charitable organizations founded to help the poor, and bodies formed to campaign on political, economic, or social issues. In Britain, examples of the latter included the following:

- The Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, formed in 1787.
- The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, formed in 1824.
- The Anti-Corn Law League that campaigned against the corn laws (duties on imported agricultural products), and whose work was instrumental in the repeal of those laws in 1846.

The second half of the nineteenth century was also the era of the formation of labour unions in much of Europe and North America, representing focused groups of workers as well as coming together in national organizations such as the Trades Union Congress in Britain (founded 1868), the American Federation of Labor (founded 1881), and the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (founded 1898).

The growth in the number and the reach of interest groups was linked to the expansion of democracy and pluralism (see *Using Theory 16*). This was reflected in their relatively large numbers and influence in the older democracies, and their relative weakness in Germany, Japan, and Spain until after World War II. In Latin America, they were either restricted or controlled as part of the state institutional system until the end of the era of military governments in the 1970s and 1980s, and they only began to emerge as national political players in much of sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia with the end of the colonial era.

The changes in the numbers and the work of interest groups are reflected in the example of women's rights activism, from its origins in industrial countries in the second half of the nineteenth century as economic changes led to new roles for women in the home and the workplace. What later came to be known as first-wave feminism coalesced around the campaign for women's suffrage (the right to vote), in which a key role was played by interest groups such as the Danish Women's Society (founded 1871), the National Council of French Women (founded 1901), the Women's Social and Political Union (active in Britain 1903–17), and the International Alliance of Women (founded in Germany in 1904).

Subsequent waves of feminism continued to see a broader social movement overlapping with the work of interest groups: the second in the 1960s focused on ending gender discrimination, the third in the 1990s focused on issues such as reproductive rights, and the fourth since the 2010s has focused on empowerment for women. Numerous bodies have been founded at the national and international level to campaign for women's rights generally as well as for specific objectives such as income equality, women's health and education, professional development, and opposition to abuse and sex trafficking.

USING THEORY 16

PLURALISM

In terms of trying to understand the role of interest groups (as well as democracy in general), debate has long centred on the concept of **pluralism**. In an ideal world, interest groups would represent all major sectors of society so that each sector's interests received political expression. Groups would compete for influence over government on a level playing field, with the state showing little bias towards one over others. As new interests and identities emerged, groups would form to represent them, quickly finding a place in the house of power. (For a contrasting view, see discussion about corporatism later in this chapter.)

Pluralism: Tolerance for a diversity of ideas, views, and values, as often represented in the dispersal of power among a variety of political, economic, and social interests.

One influential analysis with critical implications for pluralist theory was offered in 1965 by the American economist Mancur Olson in his book *The Logic of Collective Action*. Until then, it had often been assumed that all interests could have an approximately equal place at the bargaining table. Olson argued, though, that it was difficult for people with diffuse interests to find each other, to organize themselves, and to compete against narrower and better-organized interests. This helped explain why it was so hard, for example, for ordinary citizens to compete against large corporations, which had funds, resources, contacts, and much else that could be used to influence policymakers. Olson's analysis overlapped with rational choice arguments that citizens did not have sufficient incentives to become informed about politics and to engage with other citizens.

Not everyone agrees with this analysis, however, because new groups representing consumers and many other dispersed interests have since emerged, grown, and won a sometimes significant voice. Trumbull (2012) argues that it is a misreading of history to believe that diffuse interests are impossible to organize or too weak to influence policy. Organization, he suggests, is less important than legitimation: in other words, alliances forged among activists and regulators can form 'legitimacy coalitions' linking their agendas to the broader public interest. For example, such coalitions have limited the influence not only of the agricultural and pharmaceutical sectors in Europe, but also of some multinational companies in some developing countries. The rise of multiple social movements in different places and at different times also suggests that forces greater than individuals and groups come into play.

Olson was also arguing many years before the advent of the internet and social media, which have combined to make it much easier for people with shared interests to find each other. This may not result in the creation of new interest groups, but anyone with access to the internet can now create advocacy sites and invite users to follow them, post information, debate the issues, network with like-minded users, and engage opponents. Opening an account or a site by clicking a button takes little effort, and engagement may not go much beyond the clicktivism discussed in Chapter 13 (passive online activities such as posting a comment, or sharing tweets or trending hashtags). At the same time, these online conversations can create informal communities that add up to larger movements influencing public opinion, and engaging in direct political action.

Lobbying: Efforts to influence the decisions made by elected officials or bureaucrats on behalf of individuals, groups, or organizations.

At the heart of the work of most interest groups is the phenomenon of **lobbying**, a term which emerged out of a habit of citizens gathering in the lobby that separates the chambers of the House of Commons and the House of Lords in the British Parliament. In this space, citizens could once approach their Members of Parliament in order to plead their case or request help. (The term is sometimes wrongly credited to the practice of citizens approaching US President Ulysses S. Grant (in office 1869–77) in the lobby of the Willard Hotel in Washington DC.)

Lobbying is undertaken by individual interest groups, but lobbyists are usually professionals, often working for corporations or even for lobbying firms acting as hired guns in the business of influencing government (see Bitonti and Harris, 2018, and Godwin et al., 2013). Their success, in the words of long-time European commercial lobbyist Stanley Crossick (quoted in Thomas and Hrebenar, 2009) involves 'getting the right message over to the right people in the right form at the right time on the right issue'.

Lobbying has been on the rise for three main reasons:

- Government regulation continues to grow. A specialist lobbying firm working for several interest groups can often monitor proposed laws and regulations more efficiently than would be the case if each interest group undertook the task separately.
- Public relations campaigns are becoming increasingly sophisticated, often seeking to influence interest group members, public opinion, and the government in one integrated project. Professional agencies come into their own in planning and delivering multifaceted campaigns, which can be too complex for an interest group client to manage directly.
- Many corporations now approach government directly, rather than working through their trade association. Companies, both large and small, find that using a lobbying company to help them contact a government agency or a sympathetic legislator can yield results more quickly than working through an industry body.

The world of interest groups is today vast, complex, and constantly changing. There are numerous groups at work around the world, although pinning down a precise number is difficult because of the varied quality of recording and reporting. Groups – particularly the smaller ones – also tend to come and go with changing access to funding support and changing public opinion about the issues they address. One source of data is the World Association of Non-Governmental Organizations (WANGO), founded in 2000. This maintains a directory containing a list of more than 56,000 members (see Table 16.2), with a clear dominance in North America and Europe, which together account for 75 per cent of the listed bodies. It is hard to be sure about the accuracy and completeness of this listing, however, because it depends mainly on the self-listing of organizations, and 'non-governmental' has a different meaning in authoritarian states such as China. Even so, the numbers paint a very different picture from the situation that existed even two or three generations ago.

Table 16.2: Non-governmental organizations around the world

Region	Number	Selected countries
North America (USA and Canada)	23,140	USA 21,931
Europe (including Russia)	17,952	UK 4,104, France 900, Germany 619
South and Southeast Asia	5,383	India 2,288, Iran 31
Sub-Saharan Africa	4,679	Nigeria 1,157
Middle East and North Africa	1,028	Egypt 103
Central America and Caribbean	821	Mexico 115
Oceania (mainly Australia and New Zealand)	655	Australia 496
South America	665	Brazil 102
Eastern Asia (including China and Japan)	408	China 63, Japan 146
TOTAL	56,262	

Source: Based on data at World Association of Non-Governmental Organizations (2024).

TYPES AND METHODS

Interest groups come in multiple shapes and sizes, with a wide range of objectives, methods, and levels of influence. Many were founded for practical or charitable purposes rather than for political action, but developed a political dimension as they worked either to change public policy or to resist unfavourable changes. Others were developed more precisely with a political role in mind. Many have just a few hundred members focusing on a short-term local issue and working with local government, while others might have millions of members, with national offices in multiple countries, targeting national governments or international organizations. Their variety, in fact, is so great, their methods so varied, and their overlap so common that it is not easy to develop a list of discrete types. Even so, Table 16.3 makes an attempt.

Table 16.3: Types of interest groups

Type	Sub-type	Focus of interest
Protective	Economic	Material economic interests, such as business, industry, producers, farmers, workers, and professions.
	Institutional	Public organizations that influence government even though they are not organized as interest groups. Examples include think tanks, government departments lobbying for funding, or sub-national government lobbying national government.
Promotional	Public	Issues of general public concern, such as consumer welfare, public health, human rights, poverty, humanitarian issues, and the environment.
	Cause	Issues of more distinct and focused concern, such as religious issues, or the interests of veterans or people with disabilities. Includes single-issue groups, such as those dealing with domestic violence or children's rights.

Protective group: An interest group that seeks selective benefits for its members and insider status with relevant government departments.

Protective groups include some of the most prominent and powerful subtypes, expressing the focused material interests of their members, such as workers, employers, professionals, retirees, and military veterans. Sometimes known as sectional or functional groups, protective groups have restricted memberships, work only for the benefits of their members, and are usually well established and well resourced. They usually have the benefit of insider status with government, are often consulted by government, and often have the capacity to use sanctions to help them achieve their goals: workers can go on strike, for example, and business organizations can withdraw their cooperation from government.

Labour unions are a prime example. Although, as we will see later in the chapter, their membership has fallen along with their political influence, they still remain important actors in most democracies and have used their powers to achieve shared goals. In the United States, for example, union pressure in 2023 led to changes in the automobile and entertainment industries. The United Auto Workers union went on strike for increased wages, improved benefits, and changes in anticipation of the transition to electric vehicles, and was able for the first time in history to coordinate action against the three major US manufacturers: General Motors, Ford, and Stellantis. At almost the same time, there were successful strikes by the Screen Actors Guild and the Writers Guild of America, sparked in part by concerns over the impact of streaming and artificial intelligence. However, while polls founds high levels of public support for unions, the US (as we will see later in this chapter) has one of the lowest levels of unionization in the world, and it was questionable how far the gains in 2023 would be replicated in other industries (Leonhardt and Scheiber, 2023).

Alexis Rosenfeld / Contributor

Activists from Greenpeace, a leading environmental interest group, set out to study and draw attention to coral reef damage at the mouth of the Amazon. The group has become famous for staging events designed to draw attention to problems such as climate change.

Meanwhile, **promotional groups** are broader in outlook, which is why they are also known as public, cause, advocacy, attitude, or campaign groups. Anyone can join or offer support, they work on behalf of members and non-members, and they seek policy changes on the issues that interest them, sometimes involving themselves directly as when NGOs provide medical and food aid to areas ravaged by natural disasters or conflict. They are usually considered as outsiders by government, which will consult them much less often than is the case with protective groups. Their growth in recent decades represents a major trend in interest group politics, even if many who join promotional groups are credit card members only; they send donations or sign up for membership, and perhaps follow news about the work of the group, but otherwise remain unengaged.

Promotional group: An interest group that promotes wider issues and causes than is the case with protective groups, and that has an open membership.

Protective interest groups representing a specific industry not only lobby government directly, but will often also join a **peak association**, or an umbrella body for like-minded organizations. Their members are not individuals but businesses, trade associations, and labour unions. For example, industrial associations and corporations may join a wider body representing business interests to government, and labour unions may do the same for wider bodies representing worker interests. In working to influence public policy, peak associations usually succeed, because they have close links with government, have a strong research capacity, and represent large numbers of people with significant economic interests. Examples of peak associations representing the interests, respectively, of employers and workers include the following:

Peak association: An umbrella organization representing the broad interests of business or labour to government.

- In Germany, the Federal Organization of German Employers and the German Trade Union Confederation.
- In the United States, the National Association of Manufacturers and the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO).
- In Britain, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and the Trades Union Congress. According to its website, the CBI is focused on campaigning on behalf of its members, collaborating with government, sharing ideas among its members, and empowering its members to make informed decisions (Confederation of British Industry, 2024).

Another kind of interest group is the **think tank**, or policy research institute. This is a private organization set up to undertake research with a view to influencing both the public and the political debate. Think tanks publish reports, organize conferences, and host seminars, all with the goal of encouraging debate over the issues in which they are interested, and of influencing government and legislators either directly or indirectly. Most are privately funded, but some are affiliated with governments, political parties, or corporations, and have a national, corporate, or ideological agenda. The work of several such bodies has been used in this book: Freedom House (United States) on democracy, Transparency International (Germany) on corruption, the Fraser Institute (Canada) on economic freedom, and Civicus (South Africa) on civil society (see later in this chapter).

Think tank: A private organization that conducts research into a given area of policy with the goal of fostering public debate and political change.

The work of all these different kinds of groups is shaped in part by the channels they use, which can be either direct or indirect (see summary in Table 16.4).

Table 16.4: Channels of interest group influence

Influence	Channels	Features
Direct, on policymakers	Executive	Talking with government ministers before policy is finalized.
	Bureaucracy	Focusing on details, which are easier to change than broader policy.
	Legislature	Lobbying legislators with the goal of influencing their views and votes on law and policy.
	Courts	Used by groups to launch legal challenges.
Indirect, on public opinion	Parties	Exclusive links with political parties are declining.
	Traditional media	Paid advertising and favourable news coverage.
	Social media	Direct engagement with the public.

Direct channels

Direct influence is aimed at those who make policy, and is most often found in the form of lobbying. The prime target for a lobbyist is the political executive, in the form of senior members of the government. Ideally, lobbyists hope to be able to talk with them before specific policies have crystallized. Such privileges, though, are usually confined to a select few, and most direct interest group activity focuses on three other targets: bureaucracies, legislatures, and courts.

The bureaucracy is important (in democracies at least) because it is in the offices of bureaucrats – as we saw in Chapter 10 – that the details of policies are usually formed. The extent to which groups can influence bureaucrats depends on a combination of the responsiveness of these bureaucrats, their role and power, the exploitation of opportunities, and the extent to which issues matter to citizens and governments (a phenomenon known as issue salience). It is also important to appreciate that the relationship can be a two-way street, with interest groups providing bureaucrats with information in return for listening to their concerns.

The value of legislatures as a target for lobbyists depends on their political weight in government, a point reflected in a comparison of the United States and Canada:

- The US Congress (and, especially, its committees) is a vital cog in the policy machinery, because it is the place where laws are introduced, shaped, and voted on. Members of Congress are under constant public scrutiny, not least in the House of Representatives, where a two-year election cycle means that politicians must be constantly aware of their ratings by interest groups, and constantly looking for sources of support and funding for election campaigns. The ability of groups to endorse candidates keeps legislators sensitive to group demands, especially those that are important in their home districts (see Cigler et al., 2020).
- In Canada, Parliament is more reactive than proactive, with the result that interest groups treat its members as opinion-formers rather than policymakers. Voting in the Canadian House of Commons usually follows party lines,

and, notes Brooks (2020), committees rarely modify proposals put before them and almost never stop bills in their tracks. In such a disciplined environment there are relatively few opportunities for interest group influence.

The relationship between interest groups, bureaucracies, and legislatures occasionally becomes so much a part of politics that it can take the form of an **iron triangle**. In this kind of insider arrangement, groups have privileged access to the hallways of power, sometimes creating fertile ground for corruption. Japan has a long tradition of public policy emerging less from electoral competition and public debate than from bargaining within an iron triangle involving the higher levels of the dominant Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), the bureaucracy, and big business. Consequently, small businesses in Japan have been relatively marginalized. Similar triangles can be found in the United States, involving the bureaucracy, Congressional committees, and either corporations or interest groups (see Figure 16.2). The issues around which they have formed include environmental management, gun control, and the interests of retired people: the American Association of Retired People, or AARP, has been a powerful advocate against cuts or changes to social security or medical programmes for the elderly.

Iron triangle: A policy-influencing relationship involving interest groups, the bureaucracy, and legislative committees, and a three-way trading of information, favours, and support.

The hold of iron triangles has weakened of late, thanks to closer attention from media, protests from new public interest groups when they spot the skirting of public interests, and a greater willingness by legislators to speak out against closed and even corrupt policymaking. Policy issues have also become more complex, drawing more groups into the policy process, and making it harder to stitch together insider deals. Reflecting open government, there is more talk of the concept of **issue networks** originally suggested by Heclo (1978). These are more open and transparent than iron triangles: a wider range of interests take part in decisions, the bias towards protective groups is reduced, new groups can enter the debate, and sound public arguments carry greater weight.

Issue network: A loose and flexible set of interest groups, government departments, legislative committees, and experts that work on policy proposals of mutual interest.

The final direct channel used by interest groups is the court system, in which interest groups (usually the bigger ones) can launch legal challenges to policy. This

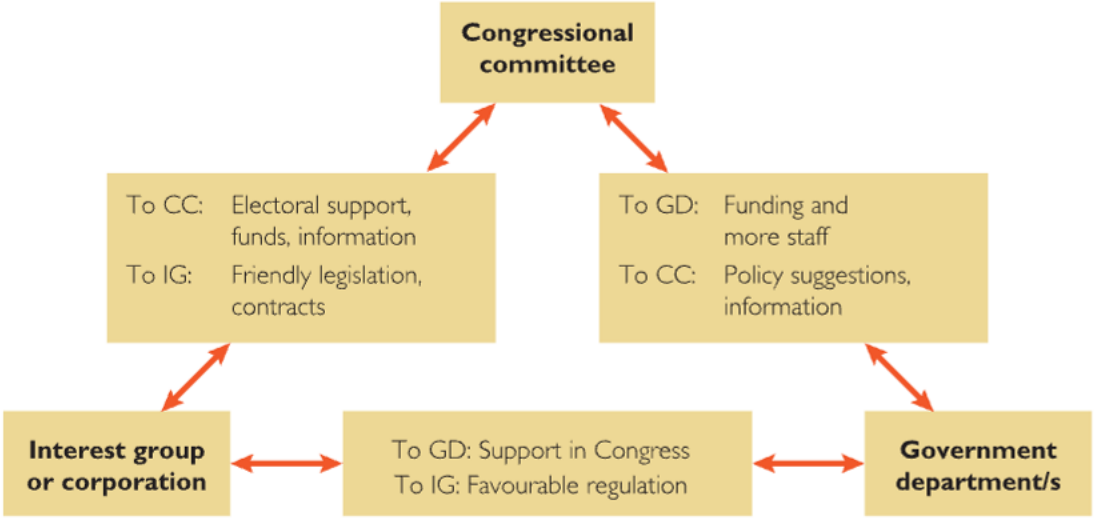

Congressional committee
To CC: Electoral support, funds, information
To IG: Friendly legislation, contracts
To GD: Funding and more staff
To CC: Policy suggestions, information
Interest group or corporation
To GD: Support in Congress
To IG: Favourable regulation
Government department/s

Figure 16.2 Iron triangles: the case of the United States

has certainly been the case in the United States, with its long tradition of court activity, but the use of courts by groups has become increasingly common in Europe as well. Hofmann and Naurin (2020) note that while Europeans 'have traditionally looked with horror at the prominence of litigation in American culture', the expansion of access to courts and the growing availability of directly enforceable individual rights (notably through the European Union) have made interest groups – particularly labour unions – more interested in litigation as a channel of influence.

Indirect channels

Outside the halls of government, public opinion is a critical target for many interest groups, the goals being to change public perceptions and habits, and to aggregate public interest in such a way as to bring indirect pressure for policy change on government. This wider audience can be addressed by focusing on paid advertising, promoting favourable coverage in conventional media (public relations), and using social media to promote ideas and bring together like-minded constituencies.

Political parties are less important as channels of indirect influence than they once were. In Europe, for example, labour unions and socialist parties long had a close relationship in their efforts to promote broad working-class interests, and the environmental movement spawned interest groups dealing with specific problems (such as pollution, waste, and threats to wildlife) as well as green political parties. Interest groups have often since become more specialized while even green parties have developed broader agendas. As a result, most groups now try to hedge their bets by developing looser and more pragmatic links, following power rather than parties.

The media, though, remain at least as important as ever, although the fragmentation discussed in Chapter 12 has meant that groups have had to develop strategies that are both broader (using as many media as possible) while also being more targeted on the social media outlets in which their supporters are most likely to be interested. Either way, favourable coverage of the issues about which a given group cares is the ultimate target. Especially when groups sense that public opinion is already on their side, they increasingly follow a dual strategy, appealing both to the public and to lawmakers.

THE DYNAMICS OF INTEREST GROUPS

As well as appreciating the types and the methods of interest groups, it is important to understand how they work. How do they make themselves heard, and how do they translate their interests into policy change? Generally, they will have more influence in democratic regimes that provide an open environment for their activities, but they do not compete on a level playing field (see *Exploring Problems 16*). There will be a bias in favour of some interests over others, some will fit more easily into the mainstream of political thinking than others, some will be heard more openly than others, and the result is the formation of a hierarchy of influence. This is based to a large extent on five qualities: the legitimacy, membership, and resources of groups, their capacity to bring sanctions to bear on government, and their relationship to the state.

EXPLORING PROBLEMS 16

HOW CAN INTEREST GROUPS BE HEARD?

In the clamour of voices, competing opinions, contested analyses, and varied levels of public interest that are all features of government and politics, how can we ensure that a variety of interest groups at least have a chance of being heard? Of course, they cannot expect always to catch the attention of governments or citizens, and they compete not just with groups promoting different interests, but with groups promoting related interests. (There are, for example, dozens of groups in most democracies trying to draw public and political attention to environmental problems, and they do not always agree on their analysis either of the problems or of the best solutions.)

There are also many questions about the fairness and equity of the process by which groups express their interests. Lobbying can be seen as a key part of the process of democratic engagement, for example, but it raises many troubling questions. Is lobbying just a polite word for bribery? Does it give powerful groups special access to government, promoting the idea of political elitism? Is it possible for wealthy interest groups and corporations simply to pay fees to a lobbying firm to ensure that a bill is defeated, or a regulation deferred? The answers to these questions are debatable because lobbyists tend to exaggerate their impact, and except in countries where there are particularly strong links between government and key interests (such as Japan), access to policymakers does not necessarily result in change.

To a large degree, the success of interest groups depends on a combination of the salience of their issues, the degree to which they are able to capture public and political attention, and the resources they can bring to bear. Groups with more money and connections, and whose interests most closely align with the interests of ruling elites, will usually be heard more readily than those functioning on the margins. There are exceptions, though, as we have seen in recent years in the cases of groups and political figures associated with the Black Lives Matter movement and the #MeToo movement; in both cases, it took heightened public awareness to help these issues reach and wider and more sympathetic audience.

At the same time, numerous interest groups continue to work at the margins because they have been unable to engage with political leaders, or to encourage media interest in their work. This raises many questions about how interest groups can be heard:

- Which targets (political institutions, individual leaders, the media, or public opinion, for example) are likely to generate the most returns for interest groups in terms of achieving their goals?
- To what extent should groups bypass the formal political process and take direct responsibility for achieving their goals by, for example, funding research, or helping those who cannot help themselves?
- Which level of government – local or national – is the most effective target for the work of groups?

The degree of legitimacy achieved by groups is important, because interests with high prestige or moral authority are more likely to have the most influence. Just how those two concepts are identified or measured, though, is not easy. Groups advocating modest reforms within the established order are usually heard more sympathetically than those looking for radical change, although groups whose members stand for social respectability can sometimes be as militant as labour unions once were. Public interest groups, for example, are more than willing to use protests in the interests of improved food safety, affordable housing, or health care. Meanwhile, groups representing professions such as lawyers and doctors are usually able to achieve their goals without attracting public hostility, while the importance of business to economic performance means that business interests can usually be heard in government.

Density: The proportion of all those eligible to join a group who actually do so. The higher the density, the stronger a group's authority and bargaining position.

The second quality shaping the dynamic of groups is membership, and, specifically, the size, commitment, and **density** of that membership. It has only been since the 1960s, for example, that the work of individual environmental groups has coalesced into a broader and global movement for political, economic, and social change. The earliest groups had a local focus and were often interested in the welfare of nature; today, there are numerous groups active in almost every country on issues as broad as climate change and as specific as campaigns against the use of plastics, and in support of protection for tigers and African elephants. Environmental awareness, and the membership of environmental groups, has grown in tandem (see McCormick, 2018). By contrast, labour unions have seen their influence reduced as the decline of manufacturing has combined with the rise of flexible work and the persistence of the informal economy to contribute to a decline in the proportion of workers belonging to unions in nearly all democratic regimes (Visser, 2019), especially in the private sector (see Figure 16.3). Except in the Nordic countries, union members are now a minority of the workforce, weakening labour's bargaining power with government and employers alike.

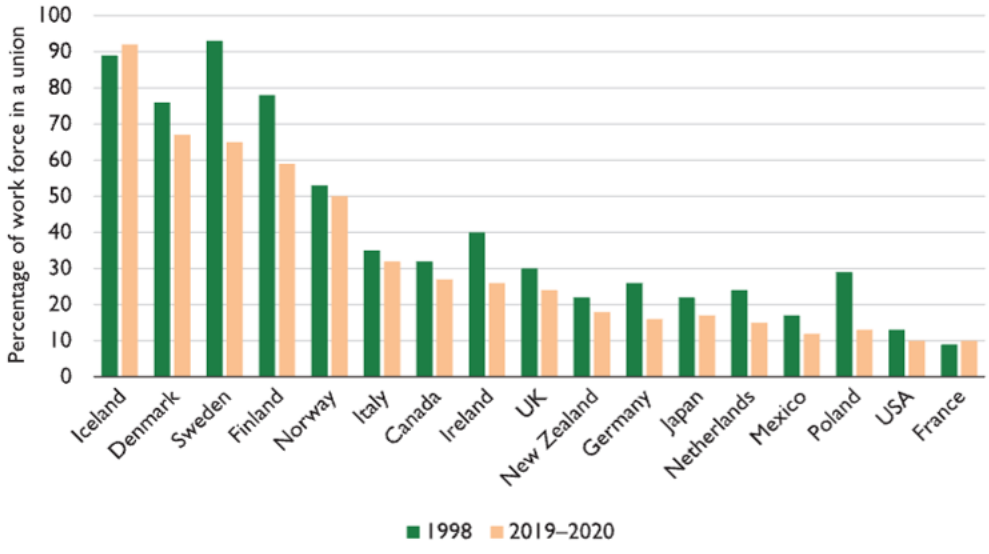


Figure 16.3 Comparing union membership

Source: Based on Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2024b).

UNFAIR PAY
Stand with us
NZNO MEMBERS STANDING STRONG
Minister, we're doing our bit in a pandemic – do your bit for us!
Stand with us
Safe Staffing Now
NURSES

Lynn Grieveson / Contributor

Nurses in New Zealand strike for better pay and working conditions. Despite falling union membership in New Zealand, nurses' organizations are still active and big enough to mobilize their members.

New Zealand is a stand-out in this regard. In 1985, union membership reached an all-time high, with about half of the workforce belonging to a union. By 2018, the number had fallen to fewer than one in five. The decline began in 1991 with the passage of a law ending compulsory membership of unions, and continued with the restructuring and privatization of government services. Unions are also not well regarded, a 2016 survey revealing that they were trusted by only 30 per cent of New Zealanders, placing them in second to last place above the media (Edwards, 2016). Unions in New Zealand have also suffered from changes in the workplace, as large sites with regular hours and low turnover have been replaced (as they have in most post-industrial societies) with smaller and more scattered workplaces with variable hours of work.

The Nordic countries, meanwhile, are a notable exception to the wider rule in Europe, where levels of unionization have long been moderate, peaking in the 1980s tailing off in recent years. For Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, meanwhile, rates of unionization have ranged between 50 per cent and 70 per cent (Visser, 2019). The explanation for this, argues Logue (2019) can be found in the long history in the region of agreement on labour law being reached between unions and employers rather than by national legislatures. Unions provide advice to workers, provide information to the public, have been behind increases in wages to women and unskilled workers, and have direct influence on corporate decision-making.

The third quality of importance to interest groups is the resources they can bring to bear to their job, including expertise. Since their interests are often so focused and specialized, they can bring more expert knowledge to bear than

political parties with their broader interests. Targeting is a key part of this: identifying the channels through which they can most effectively promote their interests. In the European Union, for example, as more decisions have been made at the EU level, so more interest groups have opened offices in Brussels, the seat of the major EU institutions (see Bitonti and Harris, 2018). This has given them a greater capacity to work with those institutions, adding to their contacts with local, regional, and national government. Several cross-sectoral and multi-state federations have been created to represent wider economic interests. The latter include Business Europe (with national business federations as members), the European Consumers' Organization, the European Trade Union Confederation, and the European Roundtable of Industrialists, an informal forum of chief executives from nearly 50 major European corporations. As elsewhere, individual corporations are increasingly represented either directly or through lobbying firms.

The fourth measure of group power lies in their ability (or inability) to invoke sanctions. The prime example is offered by a labour union that goes on strike, but this route is now more rarely taken thanks to the declining power of unions. Other sanctions are more focused, such as an interest group rescinding its endorsement for a political party or a candidate for office (meaningful only if the group has a large membership or is valuable to the party or candidate), or encouraging consumer boycotts of a corporation for selling unsafe products, or for avoiding paying taxes. Israel has been the target of many sanctions campaigns, run by groups protesting its occupation and continued settlement of land on the West Bank of the Jordan River occupied after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Targets have included banks investing in the settlements, companies with factories in the occupied territories, and companies selling technology used in securing walls and prisons in the territories (see Feldman, 2019).

The final measure of group power is shaped by the definition of the place of groups in the state system. The ultimate form of privileged access is found in **corporatism**, yet another of those concepts about whose meaning debates continue to rage. In its most basic form, corporatism is based on the idea that selected interests should have the kind of association with government that allows them to be involved directly in the negotiation and settlement of policy problems. In contrast to pluralism, it emphasizes the shared needs and interests of a political community.

Corporatism: An arrangement in which selected interests in a society are formally involved in government, and provide support in return for access.

Examples of corporatism at work in democracies include the following:

- The Netherlands has an Economic and Social Council made up of representatives from unions and employer organizations, as well as government-appointed experts. Its job is to give economic advice to the government and to act as a platform for mediation and negotiation between the government and the member bodies of the council.
- In Ireland, the upper chamber of parliament is the Senate (Seanad Éireann), whose 60 members represent groups rather than voters. While 11 are appointed by the prime minister and six are elected by graduates of two Irish universities, the rest are elected to vocational panels representing agriculture, education, culture, commerce, and labour.

- At the global level, interests have long had a voice in UN affairs through the consultative role of NGOs in the Economic and Social Council mentioned earlier in this chapter. More recently, they have had influence through efforts by international organizations such as the World Bank to work more closely with NGOs active in addressing poverty, environmental problems, and community development.

In its more authoritarian versions, as we will now see, corporatism describes a system in which the government or the state impose deeper controls over groups, moving a long way from the kind of pluralism normally associated with civil society.

INTEREST GROUPS IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

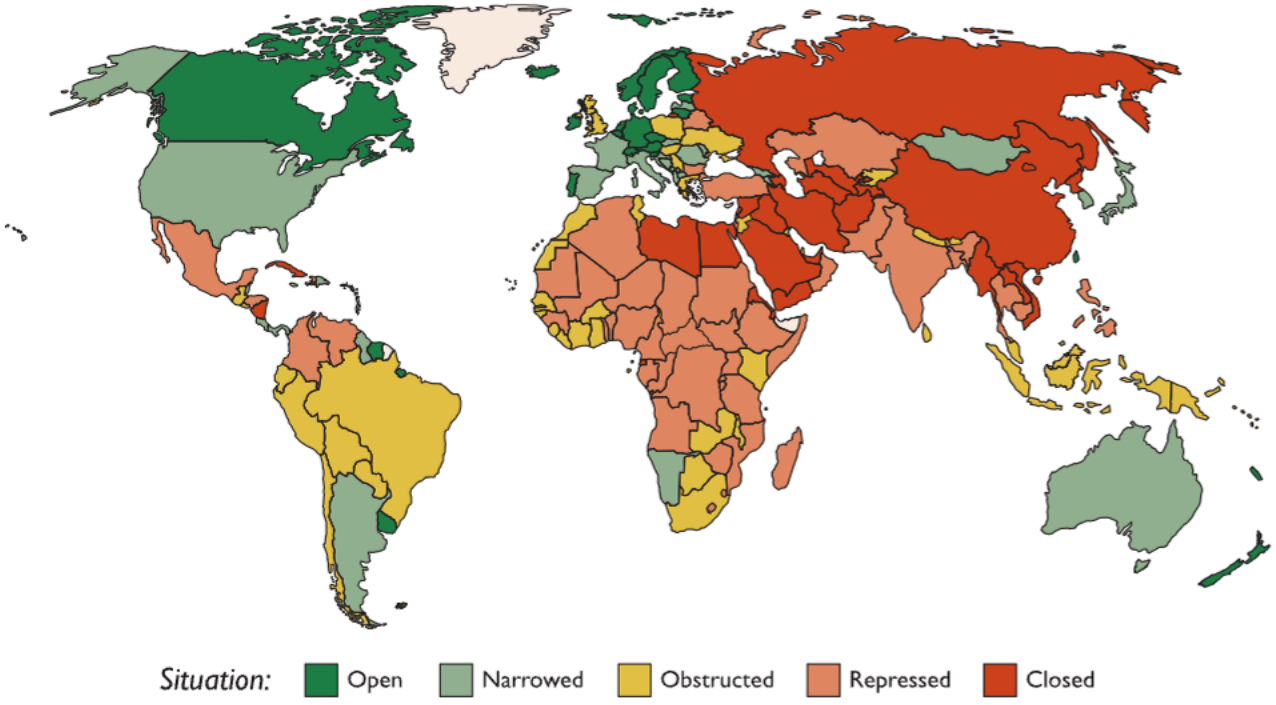
Venezuela is one the most authoritarian countries in the world, and the only one in South America that is currently ranked by Freedom House as Not Free. There are many reasons for this, including rigged elections, control of political institutions, and corruption. Also notable are the efforts by the regime of President Nicolás Maduro – in office since 2013 – to clamp down on two of the core tenets of democracy: freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. To be sure, Venezuela has a large community of interest groups, many of which – including Criminal Forum, Public Space, and the Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflicts – continue to report on the abuses of power in their country. However, they do this at the cost of their leaders and members being threatened, physically attacked, and accused of conspiring against the regime with foreign governments (Freedom House, 2021). They are also liable to be prosecuted under the 2017 Law Against Hatred, forbidding the publication of 'messages of intolerance and hatred'.

For the place of Venezuela in comparative context, and for the bigger picture of the work of interest groups, we can learn much from the annual reports on the state of civil society published by Civicus, a think-tank based in Johannesburg, South Africa. An alliance of more than 4,000 national groups from about 175 countries, it gathers data on groups and then rates countries using five categories according to the degree of openness in its civic space (see Map 16.1). The results for the Spotlight countries used in this book are shown in Table 16.5.

In its 2017 report, Civicus (2017) claimed that only 3 per cent of the world's population lived in countries where the civic space was fully open, and offered the following pessimistic summary of trends:

> Around the world, it is becoming increasingly dangerous to challenge power, and to do so risks reprisals … A consistent pattern is emerging of attacks on civil society organisations and activists engaged in defending human rights and fundamental freedoms from repressive state machinery, extremist groups and criminal forces linked to big business … [The] restriction of civic space has become the norm rather than the exception. It should now be considered a global emergency.

Map 16.1 The global state of civil society



Source: Civicus (2023). For the latest information, see Civicus at https://www.civicus.org.

Table 16.5: Comparing civic spaces

Civicus ranking	Full democracy	Flawed democracy	Hybrid regime	Authoritarian regime
Open	Germany, Sweden			
Narrowed	France, Japan	USA		
Obstructed	UK	Brazil, South Africa		
Repressed		India	Mexico, Nigeria, Turkey	Venezuela
Closed				China, Egypt, Iran, Russia

By the time of its 2023 report, Civicus (2023) was arguing that the attacks were continuing, and that despite the mobilization of greater numbers of people in response to economic shocks, human rights abuses, and climate change, the right to protest was under attack, even in long-standing democracies. 'Economic strife and insecurity are providing fertile ground for the emergence of authoritarian leaders fostering polarisation and attacking rights', it warned. 'Authoritarianism and populism remain powerful currents and come together in a political approach best described as popular authoritarianism, in which politicians speak to people's demands for change to win elections and go on to dismantle democratic institutions, restrict civic space and violate rights.'

Just as in democratic regimes, the roles of interest groups in authoritarian regimes depend on differences in the way they are approached by government,

Role	Features
Control	Incorporating civil society into the governing system.
Patronage	Acting as a channel for patronage, with leaders offering rewards to members of friendly groups in return for support.
Propaganda	Socializing voters to support the regime's political ideology and economic strategy.
Service provision	Particularly at the local level, providing services aimed at improving the quality of life, including education and health care.

Figure 16.4 Interest groups in authoritarian regimes

their power and status being a reflection of the political, economic, and social priorities of the states within which they function. While democratic regimes encourage pluralism, though, the controls and limitations imposed on interest groups in authoritarian regimes are more stringent, and civil society is more constrained (see Figure 16.4). Authoritarian rulers see freely organized groups as a potential threat to their power, and work either to repress such groups, or to incorporate them within their power structure; for an example of this dynamic at work, see *Spotlight 16* on Egypt at the end of this chapter.

We saw earlier in this chapter that corporatism is a feature of several democracies, where it has mainly worked well. It can be found also in several authoritarian regimes, but the degree of control is much greater, the goal being to recognize interest groups while using them to extend the influence of government into civil society, which is no longer truly civil. This was true of China, Cuba, and the Soviet Union during the communist era, when no independent groups were permitted, and when ruling parties sought to harness all organizations into so-called 'transmission belts' for party policy. Labour unions, the media, youth groups, and professional associations were little more than branches of the party, serving the cause of communism. The long-term effects are reflected in Civicus reports, which rate Cambodia and Kazakhstan as Repressed, while Belarus, China, Cuba, Laos, North Korea, Russia, and Vietnam are rated as Closed.

Elements of this tradition can still be found in China, which offers an example of the more authoritarian version of corporatism. At first, the Chinese Communist Party wanted nothing to stand between the state and the individual, so all interest group activity was banned beyond the work of a cluster of 'mass organizations' that were led by party officials and worked to transmit policy downwards, rather than popular concerns upwards. However, what Matsuzawa (2019) describes as 'new social organizations' later emerged in China, giving the impression of civil society while also confirming the party's continuing control. Some of these are government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs), or bodies that are founded, funded, and staffed by governments, often to provide services that government is unable or unwilling to provide. Typically, only one body is officially recognized in each sector, as with the examples in Table 16.6.

In recent years, the number of NGOs in China has exploded, with several sources (including Hasmath, 2016) suggesting that there are as many as 500,000

Table 16.6: Social organizations in China

Group	Type	Features
All-China Federation of Trade Unions	Mass organization	Traditional transmission belt for the communist party.
All-China Women's Federation	Mass organization	Traditionally a party-led body, this federation has created some space for autonomous action.
China Family Planning Association	Government-organized non-governmental organization	Sponsored by the State Family Planning Commission; for many years helped implement China's one-child policy.
Friends of Nature	Non-governmental organization	Operates with some autonomy in the field of environmental education

Source: Adapted from Saich (2015).

registered bodies in China. These work in areas such as education, poverty alleviation, community development, the environment, and health, and being increasingly active overseas in countries where China has commercial and investment interests. However, recent changes imposed by the administration of Xi Jinping have restricted the activities of NGOs, signalling some reversal, concludes Loeb (2017), towards 'governance that has little tolerance for pluralism, and increased capacity for social control'. In reality, notes Matsuzawa (2019), Chinese NGOs are far from 'non-governmental', and her informal conversations with staff members of Chinese NGOs revealed pessimism that China would ever have a civil society that was autonomous from the state.

There is a similar example of authoritarian corporatism at work in Russia. With its long history of centralized control (first under the tsars, then under the communists, and now under Putin), interest groups have faced the same problems as Russia's political parties in defining an autonomous place in the political system. Thousands of new organizations were created in the 1990s, and the government took steps to encourage them to be a source of assistance rather than opposition (Robertson, 2014). This included the creation of a national Civic Chamber designed to give 'citizens' a voice in public policy; it met for the first time in 2005, and was soon joined by regional equivalents in other parts of the country. Since the Chamber manages a system of federal funding for which NGOs compete, however, and since 42 of the 166 members of the national Chamber are appointed by Putin, there is clearly a high degree of manipulation involved. In a manner resembling China's GONGOs, the state works to collaborate with favoured groups, while marginalizing others.

Although there are many studies of interest groups in individual authoritarian regimes, such as China, Russia, and Vietnam, the focus of these studies is usually less on the role they play within the political system than on their place

in economic development, public health, education, and other areas of policy where governments have been less than effective. They are more often referred to as non-governmental or civil society organizations than as interest groups, hinting at the difference between organizations playing advocacy roles and those providing services.

At one level, the bigger international NGOs – mainly based in wealthier countries – are often active in poorer countries (many of which happen also to be authoritarian) in the provision of health care, food security, refugee assistance, disaster relief, and poverty alleviation. Among the biggest of these organizations are Oxfam International (headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya), Concern Worldwide (Ireland), End Poverty Now (Canada), and CARE International (Switzerland). Although the long-held assumption has been that the work of such organizations can help promote social and political development, and a form of 'invisible empowerment' (Chowdhury et al., 2019), their impact is disputed and debated.

At another level, local people themselves organize efforts to provide services, aimed either at mobilizing local communities and/or working for social change, without posing a direct threat to rulers. The overall effect is to engage citizens in local problems and to encourage governments to make policy changes, but at a scale that does not challenge the core goals of authoritarian regimes, or that does not spill over into efforts to improve political rights. This kind of civil society activism has been found in several places to have opened doors for engagement and change.

A prime example of this dynamic at work is found in the experience of the Green Belt Movement (GBM) of Kenya (a hybrid regime), set up to mobilize rural women to plant trees in an effort to stop deforestation and soil erosion, and to provide wood fuel and income. However, its founder Wangari Maathai – who in 2004 became the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize – argued that the work of the GBM was more than about the planting of trees, but was also about the planting of ideas, and giving people reasons why they should stand up for their rights (quoted by Hunt, 2014). In recent years the movement has taken up efforts to improve climate change awareness, and has moved more overtly into political advocacy; according to its website (Green Belt Movement, 2024), it works to 'continue advocating for greater political accountability and the expansion of democratic space in Kenya, … [and] has called for, time and time again, an end to land grabbing, deforestation and corruption'.

Two other examples show a similar dynamic at work in two authoritarian regimes:

- In China, there is evidence of grassroots NGOs working to influence local government decisions. On environmental issues, for example, Dai and Spires (2018) find that they serve as watchdogs, monitor the implementation of government regulations, campaign against undesirable policies, and put pressure on government to solve environmental problems. Rather than simply shoring up an authoritarian regime, the two authors suggest, civil society in China can engage with the state to exert political influence.

- A case study of forestry policy in Ethiopia finds that environmental NGOs have been able to influence policy without being directly invited by government (Ayana et al., 2018). They have done this by being circumspect, using indirect and non-threatening means such as implementing productive pilot projects, and working carefully to build alliances with policymakers.

As for social movements, while they face stronger opposition and run greater risks for the lives and well-being of their participants, they – like interest groups – have occasionally been a significant feature of many authoritarian regimes. They most often focus on the mobilization of the poor and the marginalized, as people facing acute problems of daily life collaborate to improve their living conditions in a hostile political environment. The urban poor organizing soup kitchens, for example, or the inhabitants of shanty towns lobbying for land reform, or groups of mothers pressing for information on their sons who 'disappeared' under military rule: all have been examples of this blossoming of popular political activity. Examples of recent social movements that have mobilized to resist authoritarian regimes include democracy movements during the Arab Spring, the 2013 protests against corruption and police brutality in Brazil, and several movements organized in opposition to efforts by China to exert more control over Hong Kong.

Another aspect of the work of interest groups and the effects of social movements in authoritarian regimes concerns those organized in support of these regimes, rather than in opposition. However, just as the degree to which groups and movements act as a democratizing force is contested, so is the degree to which they further the interests of authoritarian rulers. One study of groups in Algeria, Mozambique, and Vietnam (Wischermann et al., 2018) suggests that groups often accept (or at least do not openly reject) the interference of ruling parties in their work, support the official party line, and thereby contribute to the goals of authoritarian government. Following up on the concept of mobilized participation in Chapter 13, there is also evidence (Hellmeier and Weidmann, 2020) that movements and mass demonstrations can be organized by authoritarian regimes in order to give the impression of popular support. This happens most often in response to mass demonstrations by the opposition, at times when there is a high risk of military coups, or just before elections.

In summary, the place of interest groups and social movements in authoritarian regimes is more nuanced than first impressions suggest. While these regimes will impose close control over opposition media and political parties, and while civil society in most authoritarian regimes remains oppressed or closed, there is evidence to suggest that involvement with groups can lead to an opening of the space for civic engagement. Groups might not overtly oppose authoritarian regimes, but they can provide services or press for local policy change that can encourage – no matter how modestly – civil society. At the same time, authoritarian regimes might follow their own kind of exploitation of civil society by either incorporating groups into their work or by supporting groups and movements that give the appearance of support for a regime.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What do interest groups add to democracy, and what do they subtract?
- Is there a hierarchy of interests, giving some groups advantages over others, or does the sheer number and variety of groups result in a balancing of interests?
- To what extent do special interests limit the functioning of the market of political ideas?
- Is lobbying a natural and inevitable part of the democratic process?
- Does pluralism exist, or is it just a theoretical possibility that has been undermined by the unequal influence of different interests?
- How do the roles of political parties and interest groups differ in authoritarian regimes?

KEY CONCEPTS

- Advocacy
- Civil society
- Corporatism
- Density
- Interest group
- Iron triangle
- Issue network
- Lobbying
- Peak association
- Pluralism
- Promotional group
- Protective group
- Social movement
- Think tank

FURTHER READING

Berry, Jeffrey M., and Clyde Wilcox (2018) *The Interest Group Society*, 6th edn (Routledge). The standard text on interest groups in the United States, including chapters on their history, methods, and political effects.

Bitonti, Alberto, and Phil Harris (eds) (2018) *Lobbying in Europe: Public Affairs and the Lobbying Industry in 28 EU Countries* (Palgrave). An assessment of lobbying in the European Union, including short chapters on each of its member states.

Davies, Thomas (ed.) (2019) *Routledge Handbook of NGOs and International Relations* (Routledge). An edited collection on the origins and work of NGOs, including chapters on the issues they address and their work in different parts of the world.

Cavatorta, Francesco (ed.) (2012) *Civil Society Activism under Authoritarian Rule: A Comparative Perspective* (Routledge). One of the few recent studies of the activities of interest groups in authoritarian settings.

Edwards, Michael (2020) *Civil Society*, 4th edn (Polity). A study of civil society, looking at its features and at its prospects in the wake of increased social division and fragmentation.

Zetter, Lionel (2014) *Lobbying: The Art of Political Persuasion*, 3rd edn (Harriman House). A global view of the dynamics of lobbying, including chapters on Europe, the United States, Asia, and the Middle East.

ONLINE RESOURCES

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SPOTLIGHT 16
EGYPT

PROFILE

Egypt has long been a major player in Middle East politics, thanks not only to its pioneering role in the promotion of Arab nationalism but also to its strategic location in the heart of the region. It was deeply impacted by the Arab Spring, with pro-democracy demonstrations leading to the country's first democratic elections in 2012, quickly undone in 2013 by a military coup led by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who has since reinvented himself as a civilian president. Egyptians now face uncertainties that resulted in its recent downgrading in the Democracy Index from hybrid to authoritarian. Egypt has the second biggest economy in the Arab world, after Saudi Arabia, but is resource poor. It relies heavily on tourism, agriculture, and remittances from Egyptian workers abroad and struggles to meet the needs of its rapidly growing population while seeking to offset the challenges of Islamic militancy and Israeli-Palestinian tensions next door.

Form of government	Unitary semi-presidential republic. Modern state formed 1952, and most recent constitution adopted 2014.
Executive	Semi-presidential. A president directly elected for no more than two four-year terms, governing with a prime minister who leads a Cabinet accountable to the People's Assembly. There is no vice-president.
Legislature	Unicameral People's Assembly (Majlis el-Shaab) with 567 members, of whom 540 are elected for renewable four-year terms and 27 can be appointed by the president.
Judiciary	Egyptian law is based on a combination of British, Italian, and Napoleonic codes. The Supreme Constitutional Court has been close to recent political changes in Egypt; it has 21 members appointed for life by the president, with mandatory retirement at age 70.
Electoral system	A two-round system is used for presidential elections, with a majority vote needed for victory in the first round, while a mixed member majoritarian system is used for People's Assembly elections; two-thirds of members are elected using party list proportional representation, and one-third in an unusual multi-member plurality system in two large districts.
Parties	Dominant party, with Nation's Future Party created as base for Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Many legislators sit as independents. Parties represent a wide range of positions and ideologies.
Population	111 million
Gross Domestic Product	$476 billion
Per capita GDP	$4,295
Democracy Index rating	Authoritarian
Freedom House rating	Not Free
Corruption score	35/100
Human Development Index rating	High

CASE STUDY: INTEREST GROUPS IN EGYPT

We saw in Chapter 5 how, in authoritarian regimes based on personal rule, access to policymakers depends on patronage, clients, and contacts – an illustration of the adage that who you know is more important than what you know. Egypt is a case in point. It would seem to have a healthy and varied interest group community, representing business, agriculture, the professions, and religious groups, but government has long kept a close eye on the degree to which groups can access or influence policymakers.

NurPhoto / Contributor

Members of the Journalists Syndicate – a leading professional interest group in Egypt – gather to cast votes for members of their General Assembly at a meeting in Cairo.

The number and reach of groups in Egypt grew sharply during the administration of Hosni Mubarak (1981–2011). Bodies such as the Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of Industries lobbied for economic liberalization, including the abolition of fixed prices. The leaders of professional groups such as the Journalists Syndicate and the Engineers Syndicate used their personal contacts in government to win concessions for their members.

Interest groups became so numerous that the Mubarak government felt the need to require them to be officially registered, and took the controversial step in 1999 of passing a law that gave the government considerable powers to control the work of groups. It could hire and fire board members, cancel board decisions, and even dissolve a group by court order. Groups were also barred from taking part in political activity, and their members were subject to imprisonment for a variety of vague and general crimes, including 'undermining national unity'.

After coming to power in 2013, the administration of Abdul Fattah el-Sisi promised to replace the 1999 law with one that would make it easier for groups to function. However, a new law passed in 2017 did little to allow groups to work freely or independently, and the el-Sisi government ignored pleas from non-governmental organizations to create more openness with a 2019 Law on Regulating the Work of Civil Associations. It prohibits groups from working with foreign organizations or experts, prohibits them from conducting opinion polls, and allows the government to impose fines or dissolve organizations for a wide range of vaguely defined 'violations' (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

Further reading

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17

Public policy

CONTENTS

- Understanding public policy
- Models of the policy process
- Comparing policy styles
- Policy diffusion and convergence
- Public policy in authoritarian regimes

PREVIEW

Public policy is concerned with the outcomes of the political process. If the core purpose of a government is to manage and address the needs of society, then the approaches that it adopts and the actions it takes (or avoids) collectively constitute its policies. Put another way, policies are the product of the political interactions we have looked at in all the preceding chapters in this book. They are shaped by political culture, the interaction of institutions, participation by citizens, and the influence of the media, political parties, and interest groups. In this chapter we look at the end result: how policy is formed and implemented, how policy styles differ from one country to another, and the influences on the policy process.

The chapter begins with a review of the dimensions of public policy and the policy cycle, and the instruments used to achieve policy goals. It then looks at three models of public policy, contrasting the idealism of rational approaches with the realities of policymaking in practice. It goes on to compare and contrast the policy styles found in different countries, and the explanations behind those styles. The chapter then looks at the related phenomena of policy diffusion and policy convergence, and at how they influence the formation of public policy. The chapter ends with a review of the dynamics of policy in authoritarian regimes. Superficially, there are many similarities to the problems faced and responses adopted by democratic and authoritarian policymakers; in reality, though, there are also critical differences.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Studying public policy involves understanding what governments do (or do not do), as well as the institutional framework within which they do it.
- There are multiple policy instruments available to governments, which can be divided broadly into sticks, carrots, and sermons.
- There is always a danger of imagining policymaking as a rational process with logical goals. The incremental and garbage-can models provide a useful dose of realism.
- While most countries have similar policy needs, how they respond to those needs depends on the different policy styles they adopt.
- The study of policy diffusion and convergence helps us explain how policies can evolve in similar directions in multiple countries.
- On almost every count – ranging from the balance of power among institutions to the methods, motivations, qualifications, and priorities of policymakers – democratic and authoritarian regimes differ in important ways.

UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC POLICY

In December 2023, the representatives of almost every country in the world gathered in Dubai for the latest in a series of international conferences designed to seek agreement on how to respond to the deepening climate crisis. The conference was informally labelled COP28, referring to the 28th annual Conference of Parties to the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. The delegates were meeting against a background of yet more records being broken in global temperatures (2023 had just been declared the warmest year on record) and yet more climate-related events, including severe floods, forest fires, and hurricanes.

The Dubai conference once again emphasized the notably different policy position of different countries to a problem that was existential in nature.

- China is the world's biggest producer of greenhouse gases and user of coal, but also has the world's biggest capacity for renewable sources of energy, and its per capita greenhouse emissions are about half the level of the United States. It claims to be working to achieve carbon neutrality before 2060.
- The United States is the world's second biggest producer of greenhouse gases, but has cumulatively produced more carbon dioxide than any other country. Climate change is a divisive issue, with recent Democratic administrations working to cut emissions and promote renewable sources of energy, but many climate policies being blocked by the Republican Party.
- The 27 members of the European Union are agreed on the existence and urgency of the problem, have made substantial cuts in carbon dioxide emissions, plan to cut them overall by 55 per cent by 2030, and have a successful policy of reforestation in the interests of building carbon sinks.
- Meanwhile, less industrialized states, such as those in sub-Saharan Africa, which have contributed little to the problem of climate change, argue that they should not bear the financial and economic burden of addressing the problem, most of which stems from industry and traffic in wealthy states.

This case offers us just one example of the dynamics of **public policy**, a collective term for the actions of government. It describes more than a decision or even a set of decisions, but instead describes the approaches that leaders adopt in dealing with the demands of their office, and the nature of their response to public needs and demands. The choices they make are driven by multiple influences, including their own priorities, their political ideology, the demands placed on them, the economic climate, the character of the political system, and the available budget. Policies consist both of aims (such as targets on climate change) and of means (reducing greenhouse gas emissions or planting more trees to absorb carbon).

Public policy: The positions adopted and the actions taken (or avoided) by governments as they address the needs of society.

When parties or candidates hold public office, the actions they pursue (and avoid) and the positions they take (or avoid taking) are their policies. These are usually expressed in the form of public statements, government programmes, laws, and actions. If policy was limited to published objectives, then it might be relatively easy to understand and measure. However, government and governance are also influenced by opportunism, the ebb and flow of political and

public interest, the requirement to fix unsuccessful policies, the need to respond to new problems and to emergencies as they arise, and – in authoritarian systems – the need to retain power and limit opposition.

Political leaders will often find that their priorities and preferred responses change while in office because of circumstances. They may be diverted by other more urgent problems, they may have to respond to crises, or they may find that their proposals lack enough political support or funding, or discover that implementation is more difficult then they anticipated. In understanding how policy is made and implemented, then, it is important to avoid imposing too much order on a process that is often driven by changing political considerations: policies can be contradictory, they may be nothing more than window-dressing (an attempt to be seen to be doing something, but without any realistic expectation that the objective will be achieved), and policy statements may be a cover for acting in a way that is different from the one stated.

Whatever the course taken and the eventual outcome, policies become the defining qualities of governments and their leaders, and the records of these policies in addressing and alleviating problems will become the reference points by which governments and leaders are assessed, and a key factor in determining – in democracies, at least – whether or not they will be returned to another term in office. This is less true of authoritarian leaders, where survival usually depends less on good policy than on distributing enough patronage to allies and supporters to keep them happy.

Policy cycle: A means of understanding public policy by seeing it in terms of a never-ending cycle of stages between agenda-setting and evaluation.

One way of grasping the character of public policy (in democracies, at least) is to see it as a cyclical series of stages. The **policy cycle** helps impose some order on a phenomenon that is often complex and messy, but it also risks painting a picture of a sequence whose order is unmatched by political reality. There are various ways of describing the cycle, one of which is to distinguish between agenda-setting, formulation, adoption, implementation, and evaluation (see Figure 17.1). Of course,

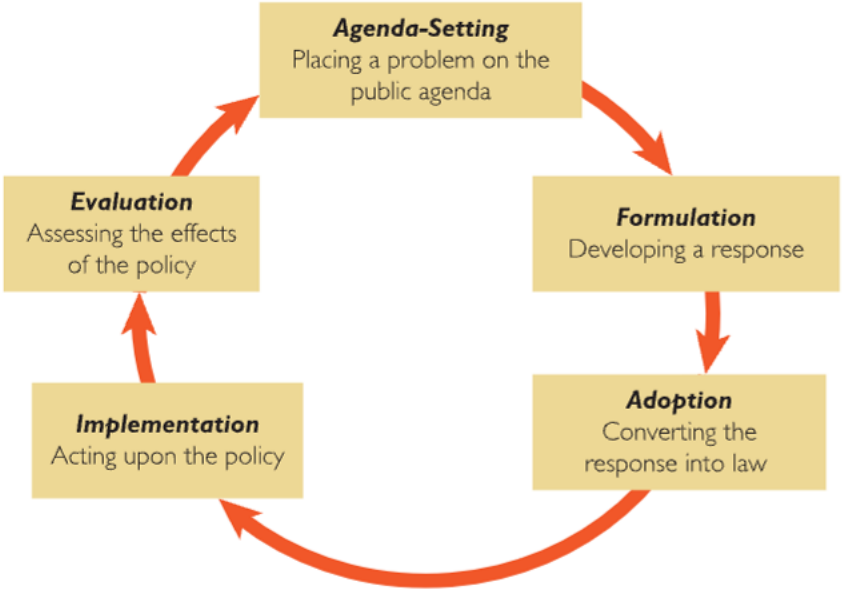

Figure 17.1 Stages in the policy cycle

these divisions are more analytical than chronological, because – in the real world – they often overlap, and the later stages might never be reached. Nonetheless, a review of these stages can help us make better sense of the policy process, help us compare how policy is made in different countries, and help us identify what happens after a policy is agreed.

As well as understanding how policies are made and implemented, it is also important to understand the tools that governments have available to them. In other words, how exactly do governments govern? It might seem as though a legislature can establish a legal entitlement to a welfare benefit, for example, and then arrange for local governments to provide that benefit to those who are eligible. In reality, however, legislation and direct provision are just two of many policy instruments, and by no means the most common.

These policy instruments can be categorized broadly as one of three types (Bemelmans-Videc et al., 1998):

- Sticks (or sanctions) include traditional command-and-control methods that involve the banning or limiting of certain activities or options. Taking climate change policy as an example, sticks include setting standards for emissions of greenhouse gases, regulating emissions from road vehicles, and limiting toxic substances in fuels.
- Carrots (rewards) include financial incentives designed to change public behaviour. Using climate change again, these include investments in public transport, giving tax breaks for the use of renewable energy and the purchase of electric vehicles, and subsidizing the planting of trees to act as carbon sinks.
- Sermons (persuasion) include public information campaigns aimed at educating consumers. On climate change, these might target those who are still sceptical about the science of the problem, or might be aimed at giving people advice on how to reduce their carbon footprint.

In addition to these traditional tools, market-based instruments have emerged as a valuable addition to the repertoire of policy instruments. In the case of climate change, a method known as emissions trading has been used successfully in the European Union. Limits are set on emissions of greenhouse gases from power plants and factories, and companies or countries that fall below the limits can sell the 'right' to pollute to those that exceed the limits. This way, there is a financial benefit to cutting emissions, and a financial penalty for failing to meet limits. Partly as a consequence, emissions of greenhouse gases were cut in the European Union by nearly 20 per cent between 2005 and 2019 (Olivier and Peters, 2020).

The success or failure of public policy is the result of a wide variety of factors, ranging from the degree of political agreement in a community on the definition and resolution of a problem to the resources that can be directed at policy problems, and the efficiency of government. Democracies have the benefit of better resources, more expertise, and more open discussions about the nature of policy problems, but they also have the disadvantages of a broader set of policy needs and a wider variety of opinions that can prompt disagreements and slow down the policy process (see *Using Theory 17*). One of the key qualities of a democracy is that can take longer to get things done.

USING THEORY 17

STRUCTURALISM

Structuralism: An approach to the study of politics and government that emphasizes the relationships among groups and networks within larger systems.

In contrast to theoretical approaches based on institutions or individuals (see *Using Theory 7*, *13*, and *14*), **structuralism** focuses on relationships. Structuralists argue that we must go beyond the rationality of individual actors and, in the words of Lichbach and Zuckerman (1997), examine the 'networks, linkages, interdependencies, and interactions among the parts of some system'. As an example, the relationship between the different elements of the policy process is more important to structuralists than the individual elements themselves.

The central tenet of structuralism is that 'groups matter', as in the examples of powerful groups such as the bureaucracy, political parties, social classes, and the military. These groups possess and pursue their own interests, creating a set of relationships which forms the structure underpinning or destabilizing the institutional politics of government. Each group within the structure works to sustain its political influence in a society which is always developing in response to economic change, technological innovations, international politics, and the effects of group conflict. It is this framework which undergirds – and ultimately determines – actual policies, because human actions are shaped by this bigger structural environment.

A good example of structuralism at work is offered by the persistence of poverty in many wealthy countries. Institutionalists might blame the problem on a failure of institutions to work efficiently or to coordinate with one another, but a structuralist would argue that poverty arises out of the contrasting interests and power positions of the groups influencing the shaping of policy, such as property-owners and the working class. For structuralists, the important factor is the framework of inequality, not the failure of institutions to be designed in such a way as to address the way in which particular families are confined to the bottom of the hierarchy of opportunity.

One of the leading figures in the field – who not only exemplifies the structural approach but also helped to define it – was the American sociologist Barrington Moore. His 1966 book *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* did more than any other to shape the historical analysis of structural forces. In trying to understand why democracy developed earlier and more easily in France, Britain, and the United States than in Germany and Japan, he suggested that the strategy of the rising commercial class was the key.

In countries such as Britain, where the bourgeoisie avoided entanglement with the landowners in their battles with the peasants, the democratic transition was relatively peaceful. By contrast, where landlords engaged the commercial classes in a joint campaign against the peasantry, as in Germany, the result was an authoritarian regime which delayed the onset of democracy. Although later research qualified many of Moore's judgements, his work showed the value of studying structural relationships between groups and classes as they evolve over long periods (Mahoney, 2003).

In authoritarian regimes, meanwhile, the sources of policy success and failure are quite different; see Table 17.5 later in this chapter for a comparison of democratic and authoritarian regimes. If the leader and the ruling elite decide that a problem exists, resources can be directed at the problem relatively quickly and there is little of the kind of public debate that slows things down in a democracy. Of course, this also means that the variety of opinions that are brought to bear on policy problems in democracies is missing, that experts will only be heard so long as their views are in line with those of the leadership, and that problems not defined as sufficiently important by the leadership will be set aside or ignored.

Contrasting the cases of Brazil and China gives some insights into the differences. Brazil is a flawed democracy with a presidential system of government, a division of powers between federal and state governments, and a Federal Senate that was divided after the 2022 elections between 15 parties, and a Chamber of Deputies divided between 23 parties. President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was elected as a member of the Worker's Party, which held only nine seats in the 81-member Senate and 69 seats in the 513-member Chamber of Deputies. Clearly, achieving policy agreements against this deeply divided background was always going to be a challenge.

In China, meanwhile, there is just one official political party: the Chinese Communist Party, or CCP, which celebrated its centenary in 2021. The leadership of the government and the party are one and the same, and China is an authoritarian unitary state in which decisions from the centre are passed down to all lower levels of government with little resistance. As a result, the process of making and implementing policy is more streamlined. 'To understand China in the twenty-first century,' argues Dickson (2021), 'we must begin with one basic fact: all political activity centres on the CCP.' Despite the fact that there are some advocates of democracy in China, he continues, most Chinese place a higher value on economic growth, social stability, and national unity than on political rights and freedoms, and while the CCP is responsive to public opinion, it will not tolerate demands that would challenge its monopoly on power. In short, the dynamics of policy in China are quite different from those in Brazil.

Even just these two examples, and the differences they reveal, emphasize the importance of making comparisons in the study of public policy. Like the study of comparative politics more generally, though, comparative public policy has long suffered from the problem of a lack of real comparison. Most of the early studies of policy focused on a single national case, with no comparison in mind (Wilder, 2017). Even today, a quick scan through academic journals such as *Policy Studies Journal*, and edited collections on public policy in different countries, will find plenty of studies of policies in particular countries but little comparison across either similar or contrasting cases. The focus is slowly changing, though, with more multi-country comparisons, and more studies of cases outside the Western countries that are home to many of the most frequently published scholars.

MODELS OF THE POLICY PROCESS

Coming to grips with public policy in a democracy can be a challenge, because of the different actors involved in shaping and implementing policy, and the different goals and values that set the public agenda and determine which policies work and which do not. In order to help us work our way through its complexities, scholars have developed three models of the policy process (summarized in Table 17.1). Moving through each of these models in order is, in part, a transition from ideal to reality.

The rational model

Rational model: An approach to understanding policy that assumes the methodical identification of the most efficient means of achieving specific goals.

Associated with the Nobel prize-winning economist Herbert Simon (1983), the **rational model** sets a baseline by elaborating an ideal and methodical approach to policymaking without assuming that its conclusions are reflected in what actually happens. Suppose, for example, that you are the Secretary (or Minister) of Education and your key policy goal is an improvement in student performance. Thinking rationally, you would first ensure that you had a complete and accurate set of data on performance levels, then you would set your goals (for example, a 10 per cent increase in the number of students completing high school within five years), and then you would list and consider the most efficient means of achieving those goals. You might choose to increase the number of teachers, improve training and pay for teachers, expand the size or the number of schools, deepen support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, improve facilities, or some combination of these approaches. Your approach is rational in the sense that it focuses on gathering hard data, setting goals, and selecting the option that is most likely to achieve your goals.

Cost-benefit analysis: An effort to make decisions on the basis of a systematic review of the relative costs and benefits of available options.

You would be engaging, in other words, in a process of **cost-benefit analysis** (CBA). Although it is hard to foresee the unforeseeable and measure the unmeasurable, trying to analyse the costs and benefits associated with each possible decision does have strengths, particularly when a choice must be made from a small set of options (see de Rus, 2021). It also contributes to transparent policymaking by forcing decision-makers to account for policies whose costs exceed benefits.

Table 17.1: Three models of policymaking

Model	Goals and means	Optimum outcome	Analysis
Rational	Goals are set before means.	Policies will achieve explicit goals.	Comprehensive; all effects of all options are addressed.
Incremental	Goals and means are considered together.	Policies will be agreed by all the main actors.	Selective; the goal is the most acceptable policy, not the best policy.
Garbage-can	Goals are discovered through actions taken and are not specified separately.	Some problems are partly addressed some of the time.	Little; government acts rather than decides.

Hindustan Times / Contributor

A toxic haze of air pollution shrouds India gate in New Delhi, the capital of India, which has the dubious distinction of being the most polluted city in the world. It has failed to develop policies that address the effects of pollutive road traffic and heavy industry.

However, CBA – and with it the rational model of policy – also has multiple weaknesses:

- It reduces most decisions to their economic and financial qualities.
- It underplays soft factors such as fairness and the quality of life.
- It calculates the net distribution of costs and benefits but often ignores their distribution across social groups.
- It can be cumbersome, expensive, and time-consuming.
- It does not automatically incorporate estimates of the likelihood that claimed benefits will be achieved.
- There is often no agreement on what constitutes a cost or a benefit.

Take, for example, the problem of air pollution. We know it exists (particularly in and around large urban areas), we know its sources, we have a good idea of how to control and prevent it, and there is little question that it causes health problems and can reduce overall life expectancy. However, it affects people differently, because some have a greater capacity than others to live and function in a polluted environment. The precise links between pollution and illness or death are often unclear, we cannot be sure how much health care costs are impacted by higher levels of pollution, and it is hard to place an economic value on a human life, or on extending life expectancy (Koren, 2017). It is also hard to calculate the relative costs and benefits of development that takes pollution control into account versus such development that does not. The result of difficulties such as these is that, in the real political world, the value of the rational policy model is limited.

The incremental model

Incremental model: An approach to policymaking that sees policy evolution as taking the form of small changes following negotiation with affected interests.

If the rational model starts with goals, then the **incremental model** starts with interests. Associated most often with the political scientist Charles Lindblom (1959, 1979), this model views policy as a compromise between actors with ill-defined or even contradictory goals, and can be seen either as an account of how policy ought to be made (namely, peacefully reconciling different interests), or as a description of how policy is actually made.

Rather than viewing policymaking as a systematic trawl through all the options, and a focus on a single comprehensive plan, Lindblom (1979) argued that policy is continually remade in a series of minor adjustments to the existing direction, in a process that he described as 'the science of muddling through'. What matters here is that those involved should agree on policies, not goals. Agreement can be reached on the desirability of following a particular course, even when goals differ. Hence, policy emerges from, rather than precedes, negotiation with interested groups. This approach may not lead to achieving grand objectives but, by taking one step at a time, it at least avoids making huge mistakes. As Lindblom (1990) himself came to recognize, though, incremental policymaking deals with existing problems, rather than with avoiding future difficulties. It is politically safe, but unadventurous; remedial, rather than innovative. Incrementalism is also better suited to stable high-income democracies than to low-income countries seeking to transform themselves through development.

The garbage-can model

Garbage-can model: An approach to understanding policymaking that emphasizes its partial, fluid, and disorganized qualities.

The **garbage-can model** highlights the many limitations of the policymaking process within many organizations, looking only at what is, not what ought to be. Returning to the example of improved educational performance, garbage-can thinking would doubt the significance of clear objectives. It would instead suggest that, within a government's education department, separate divisions and individuals engage in their own routine work, interacting through assorted committees whose composition varied over time. Weak exam scores might worry school administrators and other solutions might be worth considering, such as online learning. However, linking problems and solutions in a way that generates a successful resolution is as unpredictable and fluctuating as the combination of different types of waste in a garbage can.

Where both the rational and incremental models offer prescriptions to problems, the garbage-can model takes a more cynical view of reality. It was named as such by Michael Cohen et al. (1972), who described it as 'a collection of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be the answer, and decision makers looking for work'. In this model, policymaking is seen as partial, fluid, chaotic, anarchic, and incomplete. Organizations are conceived as loose collections of ideas, rather than as holders of clear preferences. To the extent that problems are addressed at all, they must wait their turn and join the queue. Actions, when taken, typically reflect the requirement for an immediate response in a specific area, rather than the pursuit of a definite policy goal. At best, some problems are partly addressed some of the time.

This model can be difficult to grasp, a fact that shows how deeply our minds try to impose rationality on the policy process. Large, decentralized, public organizations such as universities provide a good illustration. On most university campuses, decisions emerge from committees which operate largely independently. The energy-saving group may not know what instruments can achieve its goals, while the engineering faculty, fully informed about appropriate devices, may not know that the energy-saving committee even exists. The committee on standards may want to raise overall admissions qualifications, while the equal opportunity group may be more interested in encouraging applications from minorities. Even within a single group, the position adopted may depend on which people happen to attend a meeting.

Government is a classic example of an entity that is both large and decentralized. It is not a single entity but is instead a collection of departments and agencies using different means to achieve their goals. Several government departments may deal with different aspects of a problem, with none having an overall perspective. By considering the garbage-can model, we can see why we should be sceptical about hard promises from candidates about what they plan to achieve while in office, or their statements beginning 'my policy is …'. It also helps us better understand how we so often fail to solve policy problems, and the challenges faced in improving the quality of public policies (see *Exploring Problems 17*).

It is also worth noting that none of these three key models of policymaking were developed with authoritarian governments in mind, so they only really apply to democratic regimes. One of the complicating factors for policy in democracies is the sheer number of actors involved, ranging through the ten chapters that preceded this one, and including executives, legislatures, courts, bureaucracies, the media, voters, political parties, and interest groups. These represent a large number of opinions and perspectives that need to be included, making it hard to take the rational approach, and pushing us into the realms of muddling through and garbage cans. Policy is often much simpler in authoritarian regimes, if only because – as we will see later in this chapter – so many people are excluded from making and implementing policy.

COMPARING POLICY STYLES

Most countries and their citizens have similar sets of policy needs and demands. At a minimum, they will expect their governments to do the following:

- Provide for the education, shelter, and health care of their people.
- Ensure access to food and clean water.
- Provide and maintain infrastructure, including systems of transport, energy supply, and communication.
- Ensure public security and defence from foreign threats.
- Oversee and regulate trade with other countries and the movement of people across their borders.

Policy style: The defining characteristics of public policy in a given community or country, based on a combination of values, habits, and traditions.

Exactly how they approach all these expectations, though, comes down in large part to the different **policy styles** they adopt. The kinds of terms logically

EXPLORING PROBLEMS 17

HOW CAN WE IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF PUBLIC POLICIES?

The simple fact that every society perpetually has multiple unresolved problems tells us that public policy frequently fails in its core goal of meeting human needs, whether we are talking about security, shelter, nutrition, or education. It is clear, then, that the quality of public policy is routinely found wanting, which raises the question of how it can be improved.

At least part of the problem of ineffective policies lies in the sheer number of interests that are brought to bear on the definition of policy problems and the shaping of responses. In the spirit of the adage that a camel is a horse designed by a committee, most policies become complicated by the process of incorporating different views and values, and by the practical need to take the incremental approach by building off precedence. Policy is also complicated by the complexity of political systems, by uncertainty about the causes of many public problems, by the difficulty of defining clear goals, and by the challenge of deciding which past actions have had which effects.

Comparative policy has an important role to play here, because – as noted later in this chapter – every country could be treated as a policy laboratory, and we could learn by the successes and mistakes of others in designing and amending policy. We should not forget, though, that every country is different in terms of its size, wealth, social structure, political system, priorities, resources, and approach to the appropriate role of government. Even taking just one part of the policy process – evaluation – a report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2020) that looks at 42 countries concludes that while most show a strong commitment to the idea of evaluating policies, most face multiple challenges to promoting evaluation; these include the limited use of evaluation results, the absence of a comprehensive strategy for evaluation, and a shortage of human resources.

- Is the idea of systematically improving the quality of public policy a pipe dream, and are we doomed to continue muddling through indefinitely?
- Is the quality of public policy driven more by the complex structure of political systems or by the application of ideas, values, biases, and priorities to the policy agenda?
- Can you think of any policies that resulted in a problem being comprehensively solved?
- Which are the most persistent policy problems, and why do they persist?

associated with policy style include *secrecy*, *transparency*, *consultation*, and *coercion*, but perhaps the key measure of style is the way in which leaders interact with their bureaucrats and their citizens. For example, is policy style closed, in the sense that governments prefer to work mainly or only with bureaucrats and experts? Or, alternatively, is it open, in the sense that governments are interested in hearing what the public has to say? How much policy activity is overseen by the government and paid for out of taxes, and how much is outsourced to the

public sector on a profit-making basis? How are policy responsibilities divided between national and local government? To what extent is policy shaped and implemented by the free market, and to what extent is it compelled by regulation? The answers to these and similar questions help us understand policy style.

Although the idea of policy styles is essential to understanding comparative public policy, it is a new field of study and still needs much development. With origins dating back only to Simmons et al. (1974), it was first explored in any depth in relation to Western Europe by Richardson (1982), but was only expanded outside its limited origins by Howlett and Tosun (2019) when they applied the idea to a wider set of countries. Their study followed the general idea of dividing countries into democratic and authoritarian regimes, and produced four different style types, summarized in Table 17.2.

The four types are based on a combination of the extent to which different political systems are open or closed, and the extent to which governments rely on a combination of bureaucrats and experts, or to which policy is driven by the interests of political leaders and public input. *Spotlight 17* on Sweden (at the end of this chapter) goes into depth on the policy style of one country, but one example from each of the types in Table 17.2 gives us broader insight into the differences in how they work in practice:

- In the case of South Korea, a 'closed' bureaucratic-democratic system ranked (barely) as a full democracy in the Democracy Index, Moon and Hwang (2019) argue that the roles of the National Assembly and ordinary citizens have changed as the country has democratized in recent decades. At the same time, it can be difficult exactly to pin down the South Korean policy style because of the speed of the democratic change that the country has undergone. Moon and Moon (2020) conclude that many unanswered questions remain about the nature of its bureaucracy, the relationship between government and citizens, and the shift of the focus of policy from economic growth to quality of life.
- In the case of Canada, an 'open' democratic-popular system ranked high as a full democracy in the Democracy Index, Howlett and Migone (2019)

Table 17.2: Comparing policy styles

Type	Inclusiveness	Key actors	Examples
'Closed' bureaucratic-democratic	High	Bureaucrats and experts	Germany, Mexico, South Korea, UK
'Open' democratic-popular	High	Politicians and the public	Brazil, Canada, Switzerland, USA
'Closed' one-party authoritarian	Low	Bureaucrats and experts	Kazakhstan, United Arab Emirates, Vietnam
'Open' electorally competitive authoritarian	Low	Politicians and the public	Russia, Singapore, Turkey

Source: Based on Howlett and Tosun (2019).

argue that its policy style is one of slow innovation, with a pattern of 'over-promising and under-delivering'. They point out that Canada is an example of a decentralized system of federalism, meaning that it potentially has 14 styles of policy (those of the federal government, ten provinces, and three territories). They use the term *punctuated gradualism* to describe a style of periodic reinventions of structures and process that result in slow policy innovation, and see a 'fad-like' habit in which innovations are touted and adopted relatively quickly, but then soon abandoned.

- In the case of Vietnam, a 'closed' one-party authoritarian system ranked low in the Democracy Index, Croissant (2019) argues that policy style is based to a surprising degree on an effort to build a public consensus. The communist-era habit of an integration of bureaucracy and governing party has been replaced by greater decentralization, and a horizontal and vertical fragmentation of political power and authority. Many more actors are now involved in making policy, making the policy process more complicated and time-consuming.
- In the case of Turkey, an 'open' electorally competitive authoritarian system ranked as a hybrid in the Democracy Index, Bolukbasi and Ertugal (2019) argue that the role of the bureaucracy has changed from one of shaping the policy agenda towards one of implementing an increasingly politicized agenda. This example shows that even if we can pin down the policy style of a country at a given point in time, that style can change as the nature of government in that country changes. Policy style, like style in general, changes over time.

The idea of policy styles applies not only to differences among countries and types of countries (rich vs. poor, democratic vs. authoritarian, large vs. small, stable vs. unstable, and so on), but also to differences among sectors of policy. Some of them, for example, such as finance and monetary policy, are driven mainly by economic concerns, while others deal with more potentially troubling social concerns, and yet others, such as health care and the environment, bring together a combination of economic, social, scientific and technical elements. As emphasized by the collection of studies edited by Howlett and Tosun (2019), there are a host of 'process styles' which make it important that we understand how agendas are formed, and how policies are formulated, implemented, and evaluated.

POLICY DIFFUSION AND CONVERGENCE

While there is no doubt that different countries have distinctive policy styles, it is also true that we live in an increasingly globalized world, one of the results of which is that policies have often become increasingly alike. Once, there were no speed limits, no seat belts, no nutritional labels, no restrictions on advertising cigarettes, few limits on international travel, and few environmental regulations. Now these are almost all found everywhere, because most countries have introduced broadly similar policies in these and many other areas, and

often at about the same time. They have done this because of a combination of **policy diffusion** (Evans, 2010) and **policy convergence**. The former overlaps with terms such as *policy transfer, policy circulation, policy learning*, or *lesson-drawing*, while policy convergence can happen without explicit diffusion if different countries respond to common problems (e.g., an ageing population) in a similar way (e.g., raising the age of retirement). Both diffusion and convergence are critical to an understanding of comparative public policy.

Policy diffusion: The tendency for policy programmes to spread across countries.

Policy convergence: The tendency for policies in different countries to become more alike.

Although policy diffusion has attracted attention as an example of international influence on national policy, examples of countries clearly emulating innovations from other countries still remain thin on the ground. In theory, every country in the world could be treated as a laboratory for testing policy innovation; in practice, most policymaking still runs in a national groove. How, then, do we explain why convergence occurs without explicit emulation? In other words, why do democracies adopt similar policies in the same time period without the self-aware learning from each other that policy convergence suggests?

A useful point of departure is offered by Rogers (2003), whose analysis distinguishes between several groups of countries: a few innovators and early adopters, a majority in the middle (divided into two groups by time of adoption), and a small number of laggards, with non-adopters excluded (see Figure 17.2). Although not designed with cross-national policy diffusion in mind, this approach allows us to interpret the spread of a particular policy and to ask why certain countries are innovators, either in a particular case or in general. Innovation is perhaps most likely to emerge in high-income countries with (a) the most acute manifestation of a particular problem, (b) the resources to commit to a new policy, and (c) the governance capacity to authorize and deliver.

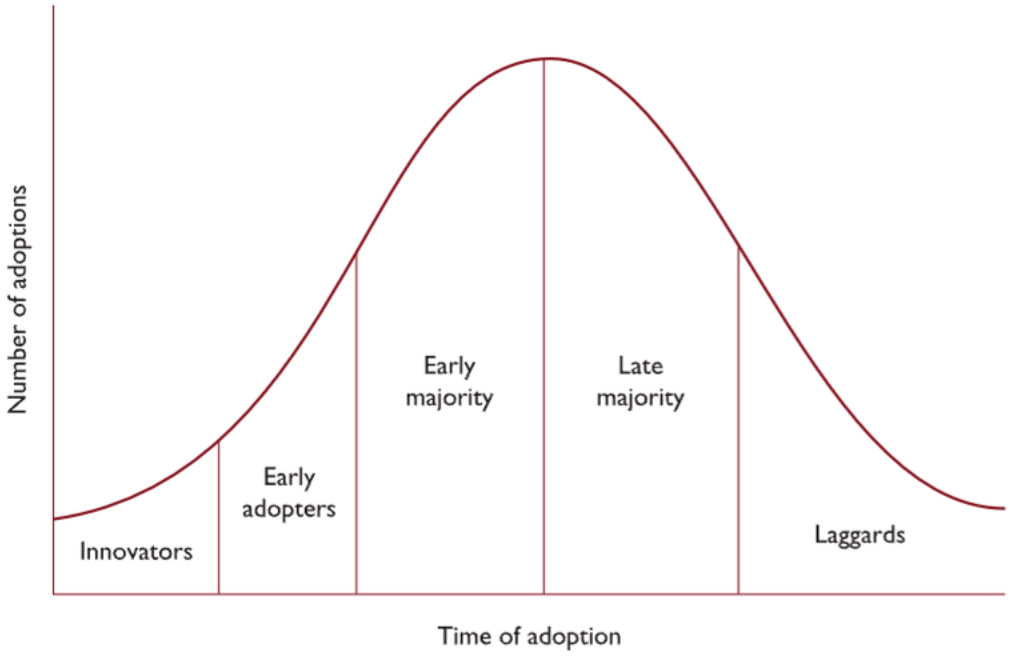

Figure 17.2 The diffusion of innovation
Source: Adapted from Rogers (2003).

Using the example of air pollution again, there was once (in the 1980s) a popular conception that when it came to controlling emissions from road vehicles, California would set new standards, the rest of the United States would slowly follow because of the need to integrate the US vehicle market, and the rest of the world would follow because of the importance of preserving global trade in vehicles. More recently, the tables have turned as Germany is increasingly credited with setting the new standards, the rest of the European Union follows the German model, and the rest of the world follows the EU model. Of course, nothing is ever this simple (the story of taking lead out of fuel is much more nuanced, for example, with parallel moves in the United States, Western Europe, and Japan (McCormick, 2018)) but the story tells us something about how innovation in one part of the world leads to knock-on effects elsewhere. The road vehicle market is now so globally integrated that common standards are essential.

Knill and Tosun (2020) identify a series of factors encouraging policy convergence (see Table 17.3). The first of these is independent problem-solving: as countries modernize, they develop similar problems calling for a policy response. At an early stage of development, for example, issues such as urban squalor, inadequate education, and the need for social security moved onto the agenda. The problems of development come later: the epidemic of obesity, for example, or the rising social cost of care for the elderly. In national responses to such difficulties, we often see policymaking in parallel, rather than by diffusion. Even if the response in one country is influenced by policy innovations elsewhere, it is still the need to respond to domestic problems that drives policy.

Table 17.3: Mechanisms of policy convergence

Type	Effect	Example
Independent problem-solving	As countries develop, similar problems emerge, often resulting in similar policies.	Under-regulated industrial development leads to air and water pollution.
International agreements	National policies converge as countries comply with international laws, regulations, and standards.	Membership of the World Trade Organization imposes common rules on member states.
International competition	Policies providing an economic or political advantage will be replicated elsewhere.	Higher levels of economic freedom and lower levels of corruption encourage new investment.
Policy learning	Explicit lesson-drawing can occur even when no competitive advantage ensues.	Capital punishment is abolished because evidence from other countries indicates a limited impact on crime rates.
Coercion and conditionality	One country makes policy requirements of another, for example in return for aid.	Chinese 'aid' to Asia and Africa that gives China access to new markets.

Source: Adapted from Knill and Tosun (2020).

Second, policy convergence can result from conformity to the ever-expanding array of international agreements. Covering everything from the design of nuclear reactors to the rights of children, these are agreed by state governments and monitored by intergovernmental organizations. The signature of such agreements is voluntary, and the content may be shaped by the strongest states (the standard-makers rather than the standard-takers), but international norms remain a strong factor in encouraging policy convergence.

Third, and moving beyond formal international agreements, international competition generates pressures to emulate successful policies. The results are reflected in an expanding supply of league tables that provide benchmarks that can nudge governments in the same direction. Consider the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business index, which ranks countries based on criteria such as the ease of starting a business, registering a property, and securing an electricity supply. Table 17.4 lists a selection of countries in the 2020 league. It is not a surprise to see the more successful democracies ranked at the top of the league, and authoritarian and/or poorer states ranked at the bottom, but it *is* a surprise to see Russia and China – with their long histories of authoritarianism and centralized economic control – ranked near Canada, France, and Japan. This is a reminder, as we will see in the next chapter, of the complexity of the relationship between politics and economics.

The fourth (and perhaps weakest) mechanism behind policy convergence is direct policy learning. Governments do not select from a full slate of options but must operate in the context of national debates and their own past decisions. So, tweaking is more common than innovating, and two conditions apply:

- Foreign models are only likely to be considered seriously when domestic efforts have failed to resolve a problem. Even then, the search will not be global but will focus on similar or neighbouring countries with which the learning country has a long-standing and friendly relationship. Part of the

Table 17.4: The Ease of Doing Business index

Rank	Country	Rank	Country	Rank	Country
1	New Zealand	22	Germany	63	India
2	Singapore	23	Canada	73	Indonesia
4	Denmark	28	Russia	84	South Africa
5	South Korea	29	Japan	114	Egypt
6	United States	31	China	124	Brazil
8	UK	32	France	127	Iran
9	Norway	33	Turkey	131	Nigeria
10	Sweden	56	Kenya	176	Syria
14	Australia	58	Italy	188	Venezuela
16	Utd Arab Emirates	60	Mexico	190	Somalia

Source: World Bank (2020).

Hybrid or authoritarian regimes.

reason why the five Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) so consistently rank together on international political, economic, and social indexes is that they have similar cultures, societies, and policies, and a long history of regional cooperation through bodies such as the Nordic Council (founded in 1952).

- Policies themselves often evolve in the process of diffusion; they are translated rather than transported. Even if a government does cite foreign examples, it may be to justify a policy adopted (or avoided) for domestic political reasons. The response to climate change has seen countries constantly compared in the approaches they have taken, the timetables they followed, the research they have supported, and the public response to actions such as the move to electric vehicles.

A final factor encouraging policy convergence (not included by Knill and Tosun in their list) is coercion and the imposition of conditions by one country on another. In extreme cases, victory in war allows the dominant power to impose requirements on vanquished states, as with the construction of democracy in Germany and Japan by the victorious allies after World War II, and (less successfully) by the United States on Iraq more recently. More commonly, economic vulnerability gives weak countries little choice but to submit to more powerful countries. For example, the practice of attaching strings to aid has long been an important theme in international politics. Along these lines, international creditors (including the International Monetary Fund) imposed reforms on Greece in 2010 in an effort to reduce that country's financial indebtedness. One of the problems with coercion as a policy-shaping instrument is that the receiving country may lack commitment to the reforms, leading to their failure over the long term.

Overall, we should think in terms of the diffusion of ideas rather than policies. Even if policies remain attached to national anchors, ideas – at least for stronger states – know no boundaries. Broad agendas and frameworks are often transnational in character and refined by discussions in international organizations. Ideas provide a context within which national policies are made, whether or not national policymakers are aware of this influence. In public policy, as in politics generally, ideas matter even if their influence is difficult to analyse on anything other than a case-by-case basis. Ideas have been a key factor in the response to climate change, for example, because countries vary so much in their capacity to change their energy supply and agricultural systems to address the problem.

PUBLIC POLICY IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

One of the poorest countries in the world is Haiti, the impoverished part of the island of Hispaniola in the Caribbean. Although it has been independent since 1804, making it one of the oldest states in the world, it has struggled to find a political form that works, a problem reflected in its multiple policy failures: nearly 60 per cent of its 11.5 million people live in poverty, rates of infant

VALERIE BAERISWYL / Contributor

Haitians demonstrate in support of their right to life in the face of an upsurge in kidnappings and gang warfare that has recently made social and economic conditions in the troubled country more dire than ever.

and maternal mortality are the highest in the Western hemisphere, about one-third of its people are illiterate, and infrastructure is often in dire condition. It ranks as an authoritarian regime on the Democracy Index, and ranks 163rd on the Human Development Index (United Nations Development Programme, 2022), results that are a reflection of its inability to build the kind of political stability that might help it more effectively address its urgent policy needs.

The story of Haiti (admittedly an extreme case) might distract us from the core reality that governments everywhere have the same basic responsibilities of leading, administering, legislating, adjudicating, and executing. They also have similar sets of demands from their citizens; whether people live in democracies or dictatorships, they all want schools, hospitals, nutrition, supplies of energy and clean water, public safety, and a working transport system. The differences between democratic and authoritarian regimes lies not in the expectations of government, but in the results of their work. Democratic leaders, for all their faults, are generally more transparent and responsive than their authoritarian counterparts, whose interests and styles are more self-serving and opaque.

Broadly, there are five major differences, summarized in Table 17.5. First, the balance of power among political and administrative institutions is different. In democratic regimes, policy is shaped by a complex intermingling of the interests of different institutions and of public opinion, the balance changing according to their relative resources, standing, and motivations. In authoritarian regimes, meanwhile, the executive (as we saw in Chapter 8) will have more power relative to the legislature and the courts. Fewer people are engaged in the policy process

Table 17.5: Comparing policy in democratic and authoritarian regimes

Feature	Democratic	Authoritarian
Institutions	Authority divided, with multiple motivations.	Authority focused in leadership or ruling party/elite.
Methods	Concern for inclusion and public opinion.	A focus on leading, with more emphasis on coercion.
Motivations	To shape policy, make a difference, and secure re-election.	To stay in power as long as possible, and to exploit policy for sectional and personal gain.
Qualifications	Government leaders usually have political experience.	Government leaders often come to power with less experience or understanding of government.
Policy priorities	Wide-ranging, with a strong emphasis on social programmes and economic management.	Fewer social concerns, and more focus on security matters.

(members of a ruling elite, a ruling family, a ruling party, or a dominant ethnic group), and (as we saw in Chapter 5) patronage lies more clearly at the heart of policy processes in authoritarian regimes. Webs of allegiance are more important than general welfare in determining where action will be taken and money spent.

In the cases of single-party systems such as China and Cuba, or authoritarian dominant party systems such as Russia and Venezuela, policymaking is shaped mainly by party institutions. This means that understanding how policy is formulated and implemented is more a question of understanding internal party priorities than of understanding the wider policy landscape. Getting to grips with policymaking in these situations is in some ways easier because the process is more focused, but also more difficult, because it is less transparent.

Second, policy methods are different. Democracies have complex systems by which information is gathered and processed, and a combination of sticks, carrots, and sermons is used to achieve policy goals. In authoritarian regimes, policy is accompanied – as we saw in Chapter 5 – by a higher degree of coercion, with more sticks and fewer carrots or sermons. Rulers decide what they want done (or not done) and they set out to impose their wishes, concerned less with public opinion than with keeping the supporting elite happy.

Having said that, though, one of the ironies of policy in authoritarian systems is that while policymaking institutions may be strong, this does not mean that policy is always successfully implemented. Jackson and Rosberg (1982) long ago noted the gap between making and implementing policy when they wrote of the paradox faced by many African leaders in having the relative freedom to make policies while facing many practical constraints in terms of implementing or enforcing them. Prime among those are budgetary limits and the inefficiency of bureaucrats. More recently, Brooker (2014) argued that the policy-implementing role of the bureaucracy in an authoritarian regime tends to obscure its policymaking role; even when it is 'making' policy, it is usually doing little more than advising political leaders.

The third difference between democratic and authoritarian regimes is that policymakers have different motivations. The desire to control and to 'make a difference' is as much a motivation for those in democracies as it is for those in authoritarian regimes, and there are parallels in both situations regarding the desire to keep particular constituencies happy. Democratic leaders, though, know that their terms in office are limited, either by the constitutional clock, by public opinion, or by the insecurities involved in holding on to the reins of power. They are motivated by a complex mix of political legacies, keeping their constituents happy, and making sure that even if their terms are limited by the constitution, their parties remain in control and opposition parties stay out of office.

For their part, authoritarian rulers also know that their days are numbered, but they hope to give themselves as many of those days as possible. Their key priority is to play off domestic political forces against each other so as to ensure their own continuation in office, and to benefit their supporters as far as possible. Uncertain of their survival, and willing to use as many means as possible to keep the support of their constituents, they may be more tempted to enrich themselves, their family, and their supporters while they remain in control of the state's resources. Those resources, meanwhile, are diverted away from more broadly useful uses, such as investments in economic and social development, and more towards enriching the ruling elite. These related goals of political survival, corruption, and personal enrichment are hardly conducive to orderly policy, and least of all to good economic policy.

A prime example is offered by President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe (in power 1980–2017), who governed over a country with valuable human, natural, and agricultural resources, but was too concerned with meeting the needs of his supporters to focus on developing a broad base of policy initiatives. He may not have enriched himself as much as many other African dictators, but he instituted a policy of land grabs by which valuable farms were confiscated from their mainly white owners and given to Mugabe's supporters, many of whom were described by the government as veterans of the war of independence (1964–89), even if they were often far too young to have fought in the war. As a result, previously productive farms were driven into ruin because few of the new owners had any farming knowledge or experience. Although inflation in Zimbabwe was running as high as 79 billion per cent in mid-2008, meaning that prices were doubling every 24 hours (Hanke, 2009), this barely impacted the elite because it had access to reliable foreign currency and could buy goods on the informal market.

The fourth difference between democratic and authoritarian regimes lies in the qualifications for office of policymakers, which produce different kinds of rule. Most democratic leaders have political experience before coming to office, and while this does not guarantee greater competence or higher quality leadership, it usually means greater familiarity with the process of government. The same is true of several modern leaders of authoritarian regimes: for example, Vladimir Putin of Russia, Ebrahim Raisi of Iran, and Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela had all had political experience before becoming presidents of their respective countries. In China, meanwhile, it has been impossible for leaders to

occupy the top echelons of the Communist Party without being able to survive the cut-throat process of working their way up through the lower levels of the party and understanding how it works.

Many authoritarian leaders, though, have either come to power through the violent overthrow of their predecessors, through a military coup, through a family dynasty, or through inheriting the leadership of a ruling party. This sometimes leaves them less experienced in administration and less knowledgeable about how to encourage supporters and to identify opponents. Such problems have been especially common in military regimes whose leaders know much more about the hierarchical responsibility structures of the armed forces than they do about the more fluid kinds of decision-making found in civilian government. In non-military authoritarian governments, meanwhile, new leaders will often inherit the structures and priorities of government created by their predecessors, and will find themselves carried along on a political tide that they find hard to resist.

Finally, democratic and authoritarian regimes differ in the priorities of policy. Governments in democracies are faced with a wide range of policy needs, and place a strong emphasis on social programme and economic management. In other words, they are incentivized by the next election to help keep their people healthy, well educated, and employed. Meanwhile, authoritarian regimes are less concerned with the contentment of the broader population than they are with their supporting networks, and because they also govern states that tend to be poorer than democracies, they are less interested in – or capable of – focusing much on social policies. They take care of technical matters (such as maintaining roads, after a fashion, and building schools) and they also often have high levels of spending on the military (with an eye to internal rather than external security), but they will usually spend less on social security or health care.

The kind of personalism discussed in Chapter 5 – where authority is based less on the office held than on personal links between rulers and their patrons, associates, clients, and supporters – is one of the most notable differences between the worlds of policy in democracies and authoritarian regimes. Democratic leaders want to keep their supporters happy, to be sure, but they also have to deal with an opposition and need to reach beyond their base if they plan to stay in office. In states with a tradition of coalition government, they have to learn to compromise on policy. With authoritarian regimes, by contrast, the links between leaders and supporters are tighter and the need to keep the opposition happy is weaker.

This is not to suggest that dictators make all the policy decisions themselves, though. As Williamson and Magaloni (2020) point out, 'there are too many complicated and potentially unpopular decisions for even the most personalistic autocrat to monopolize fully, and so they must delegate many policies to other elites and institutions within the regime'. Public pressure can shape policy outcomes, they note, leaving policymaking in authoritarian regimes just as messy and conflictual as it is in democracies. Legislatures in particular play an often-underestimated role, being used as a tool for the approval of policies, or as handy scapegoats for dictators to blame if policies fail.

As well as appreciating these five sets of differences, it is important to distinguish between different types of authoritarian government. At one extreme, as noted above, many military and personal rulers show much more concern for their own prosperity than for that of their country, leading to a policy shortage. At the other extreme, modernizing regimes whose ruling elites display a clear sense of national goals and a secure hold on power follow long-term policies, especially for economic development. Such countries do not suffer from inertia, but instead find it easier to push through substantial policy change, because they can suppress the short-term demands that would arise in a more open political system.

Some surviving communist states, notably China, offer an example of the latter approach. China survives as an authoritarian regime partly because it pursues policies that have led to rapid economic development; it was not until 1998 that the GDP of China reached $1 trillion, and until 2004 that it reached $2 trillion, since when it has grown by another $16 trillion (World Bank, 2024). The capacity of the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party to form and implement coherent policy in the world's most populous country is a remarkable achievement. It owes much to political flexibility, the country's authoritarian tradition, and the legitimacy the regime has derived from economic growth. The leadership's sensitivity to public concerns, unusual in authoritarian regimes, is seen not only in the achievement of economic development but also in attempts to limit its unequal consequences. For example, the party's 2006 programme, *Building a Harmonious Society*, sought to reduce income inequality, improve access to medical care for rural-dwellers and urban migrants, extend social security, and contain the environmental damage from industrialization (Saich, 2015).

The story in post-communist Russia offers a clear contrast. After the initial chaotic transition from communism, the country's rulers scored multiple policy successes:

- A more predictable environment was created for business investment.
- A recentralization of power encouraged the more uniform application of a newly codified legal system.
- Tax revenues improved.
- Social policy became more coherent with a controversial 2005 reform that replaced the bulk of Soviet-era privileges (such as free or subsidized housing, transportation, and medicine) with 'supposedly equivalent cash payments' (Twigg, 2005).

Unfortunately, the hopes that Russia was evolving into a democracy were soon dashed after Vladimir Putin became president in 2000. Policymaking has since been subject to the political requirements of the ruling elite, with industrialists who pose a political threat to Putin finding that numerous rules and regulations are invoked selectively against them. As the country's rulers have built their personal wealth, deep-rooted social problems such as poverty, alcoholism, violent crime, and rural depopulation are not given the priority they would receive in a democracy. Matters have since been made worse by Putin's

illegal land-grab of Crimea in 2012 and his invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which have resulted in international sanctions and a diversion of resources into fighting a war.

Although there are clear differences in the roles played by institutions in democratic and authoritarian regimes, and in the way that citizens participate in the political process, when it comes to understanding policy there are a large number of similarities between the two types. The policy cycle applies to both, as do the instruments of policy, and the effects of diffusion and convergence. Policy styles, though, are distinctive, with authoritarian regimes tending towards low levels of inclusiveness. Even so, dictators cannot always have their own way, and despite the high levels of control exerted by authoritarian regimes, they cannot survive without the support of their elites, and the continuation of that support means taking the policy preferences of those elites into consideration.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Given the complexities of policymaking, why do politicians keep making unrealistic promises, and why do voters keep accepting them?
- What additional steps, if any, would you add to the policy cycle?
- Which of the three models of the policy process offers the most insight into the realities of the policy process?
- Which policy instruments are likely to be most effective in reducing (a) obesity, (b) drug addiction, (c) texting while driving, and (d) climate change?
- Why does policy often fail to achieve its objectives?
- The chapter outlines five differences between democracies and authoritarian systems in their approach to policy. To what extent are they substantial, and to what extent are they simply a matter of degree?

KEY CONCEPTS

- Cost-benefit analysis
- Garbage-can model
- Incremental model
- Policy convergence
- Policy cycle
- Policy diffusion
- Policy style
- Public policy
- Rational model
- Structuralism

FURTHER READING

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ONLINE RESOURCES

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SPOTLIGHT 17
SWEDEN

PROFILE

Sweden ranks at or near the top of international league tables focused on democracy, political stability, economic development, education, and social equality; using these measures, it can be seen as one of the world's most successful political systems. The Social Democrats have held a plurality (and sometimes a majority) in the national parliament since 1917, Sweden has traditionally lacked significant internal divisions, it has long pursued public policies that have helped keep economic productivity high and unemployment low, and it has been a committed member of the European Union since 1995. Sweden combines a high standard of living with a comparatively equal distribution of income, showing – with other Nordic states – that mass affluence and limited inequality are compatible. Change is afoot, though, as concerns about immigration feed into support for right-wing political parties, and as Sweden in 2024 ended decades of neutrality in international affairs by joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Form of government	Unitary parliamentary constitutional monarchy. Date of state formation debatable, and oldest element of constitution dates from 1810.
Executive	Parliamentary. The head of government is the prime minister, who is head of the largest party or coalition, and governs in conjunction with a cabinet. The head of state is the monarch.
Legislature	Unicameral Riksdag ('meeting of the realm') with 349 members, elected for renewable four-year terms.
Judiciary	The constitution consists of four entrenched laws: the Instrument of Government, the Act of Succession, the Freedom of the Press Act, and the Fundamental Law on Freedom of Expression. The Supreme Court (16 members appointed until retirement at the age of 67) is traditionally restrained.
Electoral system	The Riksdag is elected by party list proportional representation, with an additional tier of seats used to enhance proportionality. The national vote threshold (the share of votes needed to be awarded any seats) is 4 per cent.
Parties	Multi-party, the Social Democrats historically leading and sharing their position on the left with the Left Party and the Greens. However, a centre-right coalition (led by the conservative Moderates and including the Centre Party, the Christian Democrats, and the Liberals) has recently gained ground.
Population	10 million
Gross Domestic Product	$591 billion
Per capita GDP	$56,378
Democracy Index rating	Full Democracy
Freedom House rating	Free
Corruption score	82/100
Human Development Index rating	Very High

CASE STUDY: PUBLIC POLICY IN SWEDEN

rusm

The Riksdag in Stockholm, the national legislature that lies at the heart of Sweden's notably transparent and consensual style of policymaking.

The Swedish policy style was once described as 'open, rationalistic, consensual and extraordinarily deliberative' (Anton, 1969). Later, Richardson et al. (1982) characterized Sweden's policy style as anticipatory and consensus-seeking. Little has since changed: even in a small unitary state with sovereignty firmly based on a unicameral legislature (the Riksdag), Sweden has avoided the potential for centralization and has developed an elaborate negotiating democracy which is culturally and institutionally secure.

One factor sustaining this policy style is the compact size and policy focus of Sweden's ten central government departments, which together employ about 4,600 staff. Changes have also come to the division of responsibilities among the local, regional, national, and European levels, with more devolution to municipal bodies for reasons – explains the government – of greater democracy and better contact between policymakers and citizens (Government Offices of Sweden, 2024). Most technical issues, and the services provided by the extensive welfare state, are contracted out to more than 300 public agencies and to local government.

Committees of enquiry (also known as 'commissions') are key to the process. They consult with relevant interests and political parties, their recommendations are published and discussed, the relevant ministry examines each report, a government bill is drafted if needed, and the bill is then discussed in the Riksdag, where it may be modified before reaching the statute book. This procedure is slow, but it combines elements of both the rational and incremental policy models: information is collected and analysed, and organized opponents of the proposal are given ample opportunity to voice their concerns.

There are downsides, because extensive deliberation may contribute to bland rather than innovative policy, and the emphasis on policy formulation may be at the expense of insufficient focus on implementation. The style is distinctively Swedish, though, and offers a useful yardstick against which to compare the less measured policymaking styles found in other democracies.

Further reading

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18

Political economy

CONTENTS

- Understanding political economy
- Origins and evolution
- Comparative political economy
- The welfare state
- Political economy in authoritarian regimes

PREVIEW

This chapter focuses on the links between politics, government, and economics, showing their importance to one another. Long studied separately, they have been re-connected as political scientists and economists have worked to better understand their mutual intersections. Just as it is important to understand (through comparison) how political systems work, and how democracy and authoritarianism differ, so it is important to understand (also through comparison) how economic systems work, how and why governments take different approaches to the economy, and how these differences impact the nature of government and politics.

The chapter begins with a survey of political economy and of the kinds of questions it addresses, including how economies are structured and why some societies are rich while others are poor. It then reviews the way in which our understanding of political economy has evolved, before looking in turn at four of the major perspectives on political economy, ranging from classical liberalism to modern liberalism, along with several of their more important sub-categories. Modern liberalism is the perspective found most often in democracies today, although there are signs in several countries of a return to policies of economic nationalism. The chapter then continues with an assessment of the welfare state as it has evolved in mainly wealthier democracies, closing with a review of political economy in authoritarian regimes. This focuses particularly on how state capitalism has taken hold in countries such as China and Russia, while also reviewing concepts such as the resource curse and the rentier state.

HIGHLIGHTS

- The revival of the study of political economy has given us new insights into the interaction between politics and economics.
- The classical liberal emphasis on free markets offers the foundation for political economy, and continues to be found in many countries in the form of neoliberalism.
- Radicalism arose as a reaction to the weaknesses of the free market, but its analyses were hurt by the excesses of communism and state socialism.
- Most democracies today are based on modern liberal views about free markets and redistribution, with a revival of economic nationalism in some.
- There are few agreements on the best approaches to economic development, while opinions about the welfare state have been reassessed in the wake of international financial pressures.
- State capitalism is a distinctive approach to understanding political economy in many authoritarian regimes.

UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL ECONOMY

One of the highest-ranked democracies in Africa is Botswana, a country of just over 2 million people that became independent in 1966. Although it is a flawed democracy, rather than a full democracy, it ranks above many European states (such as Belgium and Poland) on the Democracy Index, and above many mainly successful Latin American and Asian states. One of the most important reasons for its success lies at the confluence of politics and economics: it is one of the world's biggest producers of diamonds, but instead of allowing that wealth to be misused and to feed into corruption (as has happened with the oil wealth of Nigeria), it runs a joint venture with De Beers, the world's biggest diamond mining and trading company, and has carefully channelled the profits into economic development. Once one of the poorest countries in the world, Botswana today has one of the fastest growth rates of per capita GDP in the world, and ranks as an upper middle-income country in the same vein as Brazil and Indonesia. However, as we will see later in this chapter, it has notably high levels of economic inequality, suggesting that not all its people have benefited from its policies.

The case of Botswana illustrates the importance of understanding **political economy**, or the intersection of politics and economics. These are two fields that are impossible to divorce from one another: to a large degree, political decisions are driven by economic needs and pressures, while every government's policy choices are deeply influenced by economic considerations. Political economy is both a means of undertaking political analysis generally and also an approach to the study of any number of more focused topics, ranging from agriculture to communications, culture, education, the environment, finance, gender, labour, migration, trade, and war. So far in this book our attention has been focused on the political side of the relationship; in this closing chapter we switch to the economic perspective, referring back to the institutions and processes discussed in preceding chapters, and looking comparatively at how economic trends impact political decisions, and vice versa.

Political economy: A branch of the social sciences that studies the relationships between markets and the state.

The kinds of questions addressed by political economists include the following:

- How are economies structured and how do these structures vary?
- Why are some societies wealthy while others are poor?
- How and when is government intervention in the economy appropriate?
- How should governments respond to recessions and unemployment?
- Why do men so often earn more than women for the same work?
- What are the implications of tax policy?

The point of departure is the classical liberal view that individuals and societies are most likely to prosper if they are allowed to pursue their interests with minimal intervention from government. As discussed later in this chapter, though, radicals disagree with this view, arguing instead that government intervention is essential in the interests of ensuring equality and justice. Meanwhile, economic nationalism opts for government protection of the economies of

states, while modern liberalism believes that government should protect rights while engaging in the redistribution of wealth and opportunity. The latter point can be seen in the work of the welfare state that has been so central to thinking about political economy in wealthier democracies.

Coming to grips with political economy in authoritarian regimes is not just a matter of comparing dictators and democrats, or wealth and poverty, but is also a matter of looking in more depth at the interactions between politics and economic policy. In most cases, both are used to exert control, but while this has often led to inefficiency and corruption, the experiences of authoritarian regimes are more complex and nuanced than the use of simple models suggests.

Before going into more depth on political economy, we need to come to grips with some of the key terms used in this chapter. The first of these is **economics**. We saw in Chapter 1 that political science is the study of the theory and practice of government and politics, focusing on the structure and dynamics of institutions, political processes, and political behaviour. This is paralleled by economics, which focuses on matters such as production, the creation and distribution of wealth, the causes and effects of scarcity, the relationship between supply and demand, and the efficient use of resources. The study of economics is concerned with **markets**, finance, banking, business, and trade, the key actors involved ranging from individual consumers to small business, large business, multinational corporations, and – of course – governments.

Economics: The study of the theory and practice of the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services.

Markets: The arenas within which goods and services are bought and sold, with prices determined mainly by supply and demand.

We also saw in Chapter 1 that a political system consists of the interactions and organizations through which a society reaches and successfully enforces collective decisions. As we have seen, political systems come in many different

Jeremy Moeller / Contributor

The headquarters of the European Central Bank in Frankfurt, Germany, with a logo representing the European single currency, the euro. Economics and markets have been at the core of the evolution of the European Union.

forms, beginning with the broad differences between democratic and authoritarian regimes, and moving to the more detailed differences in the way that institutions are structured and in which people participate in politics.

For its part, an **economic system** consists of similar sets of interactions and organizations, and such systems also come in many different forms. In much the same way as different political systems are identified by the extent to which citizens participate in government, and can expect government to protect their political rights, so different economic systems are identified by the manner in which governments and citizens participate in the marketplace, and the extent to which citizens can or should expect government to protect their economic rights.

Economic system: The interactions and institutions through which a society manages production, distribution, and consumption, involving different degrees of interaction between governments and markets.

Just as there are comparative indices for measuring democracy – including the Democracy Index and *Freedom in the World* – so there are different means for measuring and comparing different levels of government intervention in the marketplace. One of these is the Index of Economic Freedom maintained by the Fraser Institute, a Canadian think-tank. The index is based on 42 measures that rate countries according to such factors as the size and reach of government, approaches to property rights, levels of access to sound money, and regulation of credit. Each country is given a score out of 10, with the freest economies earning the highest scores and the more controlled economies earning the lowest scores.

The definition of economic freedom is controversial, and no discussion of the work of the Fraser Institute would be complete without pointing out that it is a politically conservative body, much like other organizations that maintain similar indices, such as the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute, both based in the United States. Figure 18.1 gives examples from the 2022 Fraser Economic Freedom of the World index, which shows that all states have some government intervention in their economies. Hong Kong had the highest ratings, most democracies were placed in the range of 7.0 or higher, while hybrid and authoritarian regimes had scores ranging between 3.0 and 7.0. The five BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa – see Chapter 3) were at the middle level of the rankings, ranging between China at 6.3 and India at 6.7. Venezuela was placed last with a score of 3.32, while more than 30 countries were not ranked because of a lack of reliable information.

ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

'Political economy,' claims Clark (2016), 'was the original social science.' The use of the term dates back to seventeenth-century France, where it referred to the financial management of the royal household. Its meaning then expanded to describe the study of the causes of the wealth of nations (reflected in the classic work of that title by the Scottish economist Adam Smith (1776)), assessing the policies that governments should follow as they sought to build the economies of the societies they ruled. The classical liberal view of political economy was that markets worked best when left free of any government intervention short of laws aimed at protecting property rights. This view spilled over into trade, with many major economies adopting **free trade** policies during the nineteenth century, leading to a massive expansion of trade

Free trade: The reduction or removal of barriers to trade, creating an open and competitive marketplace, either between two countries, or among three or more.

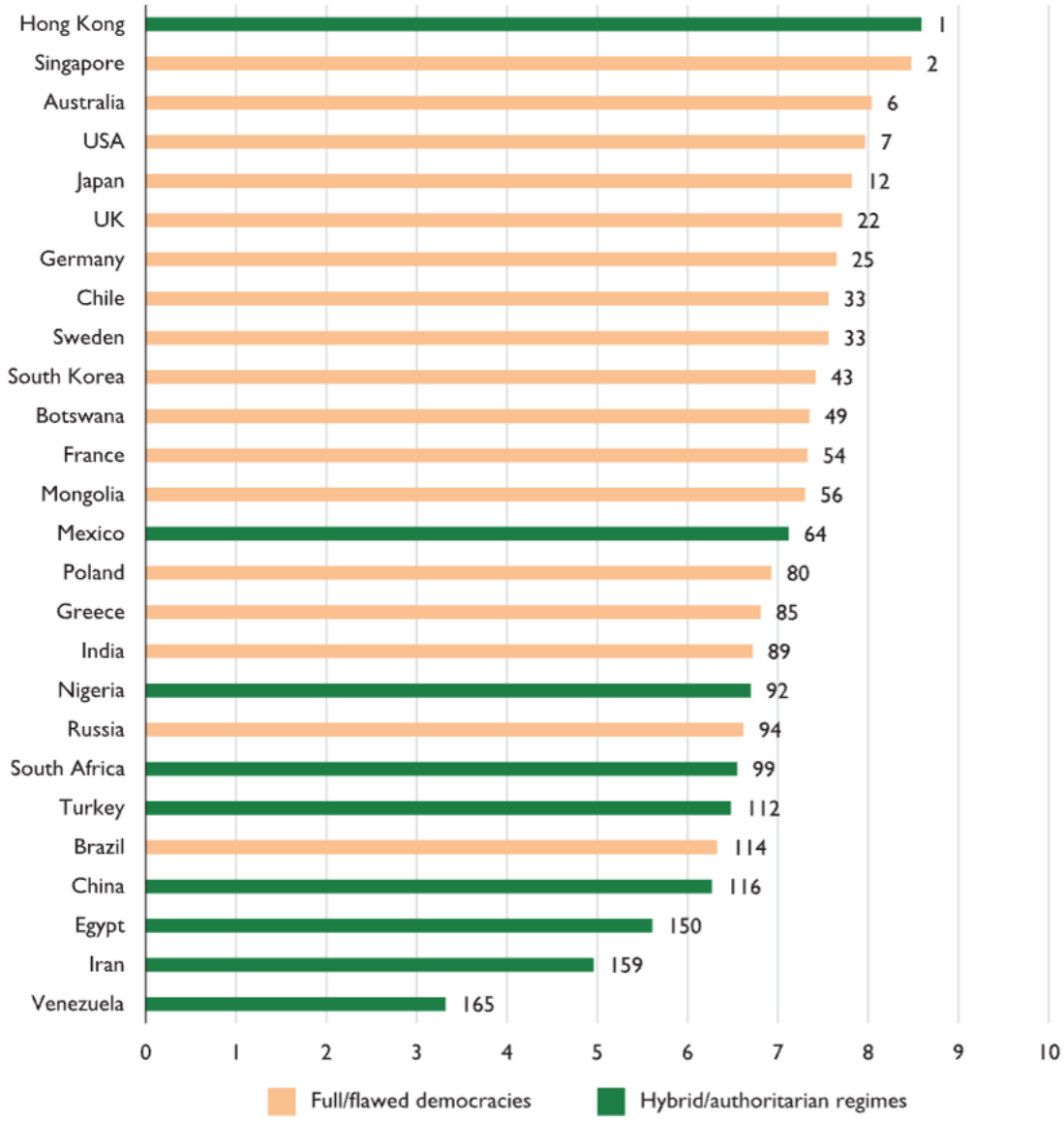

Figure 18.1 Economic Freedom of the World

Source: Based on Fraser Institute (2022). Scores are out of 10, with higher scores indicating greater levels of freedom. Ranking (out of 165) indicated at the end of each column. For the latest information, see Fraser Institute at https://www.fraserinstitute.org.

and capital flows, breakthroughs in technology and communications, a reduction in the costs of transport, and an explosion of migration. This all set off what Ikenberry (2000) has described as 'the first age of globalization'.

It was not long, though, before the costs of free markets became apparent (in the industrial world, at least) in the form of problems such as pollution, child labour, urban blight, unemployment (as workers were replaced by machines), crime, and social unrest. Clearly, argued some, governments needed to take a more radical and interventionist approach to the management of markets. There was also a move during the second half of the nineteenth century to divide the perspectives of politics and economics as political scientists, economists, and sociologists began to move in separate directions, prompted by differences in their views about

the appropriate role of government and about approaches to research. Economists took a more quantitative approach than most political scientists, for example, building new models based on the assumption that people made rational decisions based on calculations of costs and benefits. They also argued that economics and politics had different interests and points of departure (see Clark, 2016):

- Individuals drove economic choices, while political choices were collective.
- Economic decisions were based on a desire to achieve prosperity, while political decisions were targeted on the achievement of justice.
- Economic decisions took place within the market, while political decisions took place within government.

By the 1960s, there was a realization that these divisions were artificial and unhelpful, and new efforts were made to bring political science and economics back together again. There was also a change in the way that political economy was understood: while earlier perspectives had been based mainly on experiences in the industrialized West, the thinking was broadened by the colonial era in Africa and Asia, and the slow end of military government in Latin America. A growing number of what were initially known as *less developed countries* (LDCs), *developing countries*, or *underdeveloped countries* introduced different sets of political and economic circumstances to the debate. The challenge of understanding **development** now moved up the agenda of political economy, even if there was little agreement on how it could best be defined. There was also disagreement on how emerging countries – most of which had long been in an unequal and exploited relationship with colonial powers – could address the new opportunities presented by independence and improve their place in the global system, in both absolute and relative terms (see Todaro and Smith, 2020).

Development: The improvement of the economic and social well-being of peoples, communities, or states. Often used only in the context of poorer states.

As they applied to LDCs, the four Western perspectives on political economy (see following section for more details) took different positions (Clark, 2016). For classical liberals, the key was to leave the market to function with minimal government interference. This was hard to achieve in LDCs, given that many had ineffective governments that were vulnerable to manipulation by particular interests, received foreign aid that created a form of dependency, and found it hard to protect their markets from free trade. They also often lacked profitable resources, needed long-term investment to develop infrastructure, and had communal cultures that impeded the entrepreneurial abilities of individuals.

Radicals took their lead from the argument made by Lenin (1917) that poorer countries had become integrated into the international system through the exploitation of cheap labour and natural resources, which was helping rich industrialists offset revolutionary discontent at home. This idea fed into a new **dependency theory** that became popular in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in the work of Latin American economists. This argued that European colonialism undermined indigenous social and economic institutions, along with their capacity to develop independently of their relationship with European colonial powers. Development was focused on a few key resources such as minerals, timber, and agriculture, most of the profits from which went to Europe. With these concerns in mind, LDCs were encouraged to minimize their contacts with rich

Dependency theory: A perspective based on the argument that resources flow from a periphery of poor states to a core of wealthy states, creating political and economic dependency.

countries, and to better protect home industries, so that they had a better chance of developing independently.

For their part, conservatives in the developed world gave LDCs lower priority; their concern was with political economy arrangements at home. Their support for traditional ideas and institutions – combined with their isolationist philosophy – spilled over into their views about LDCs, in regard to which they encouraged support for pre-capitalist values such as loyalty, authority, and the community, support for protectionism, and opposition to foreign aid. Their opposition to communism, however, often encouraged them to support authoritarian governments that took anti-communist positions, such as Iran, Pakistan, Peru, the Philippines, South Vietnam, Turkey, and Venezuela.

Finally, the modern liberal perspective suggested that the problems of LDCs stemmed from a combination of underdeveloped markets, ineffective government, extremes in inequality, and the harm posed to LDCs by unequal trade relationships. Its recipe for success included balancing growth with fairness (rising GDP combined with improvements in the life of the average person through better education and health care, for example), the expansion of opportunities for individuals, **fair trade**, striking a balance between free trade and protectionism, reaching equitable free trade agreements, and providing aid that created new opportunities rather than dependency (see Ehrlich, 2018).

Fair trade: The idea that producers in poorer countries should earn a bigger share of the profits from the sale of their commodities and be paid a fair price for their work.

The end of the Cold War not only signalled the collapse of the communist bloc as a distinctive actor in the global system, but also emphasized and accelerated the economic emergence of Asia and Latin America. The potential of many countries in these regions had long been understood, but their strengthening global positions now became more obvious, helped by trends towards greater democracy in several of them. As we saw in Chapter 3, the changing economic balance was exemplified by the introduction in 2001 of the acronym BRICS to summarize the strengthening roles of Brazil, Russia, India, and China (with South Africa added later). By 2012, Jim O'Neill – the investment banker who had invented the acronym – was talking of the Next 11, or N11: a secondary group of emerging markets that included Bangladesh, Egypt, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria, and Vietnam (Martin, 2012). While there were positive economic trends in these countries, however, many others continued to lag behind, suffering underdeveloped economies, inadequate primary education and health care, environmental unsustainability, and – in the worst cases – extreme poverty and hunger.

Global financial crisis: The crisis sparked in 2007 by financial deregulation and speculation in the United States, which spread quickly to Europe.

A shock came to the international system in 2007 with the breaking of a **global financial crisis** that was the worst of its kind since the Great Depression of the 1930s. More a North Atlantic crisis than one with truly global proportions, it had its origins in inadequate financial regulation in the United States. This allowed banks and mortgage companies to lend to borrowers who were not in the position to make regular payments on their debt. The problem expanded to Europe when banks and financial institutions there took advantage of buying these so-called 'toxic assets' for quick profits. When the housing market collapsed in the United States, many institutions on both sides of the Atlantic either went bankrupt or turned to the government for help, stock prices plummeted, many people lost their jobs and their homes, and shrinking consumer demand led to financial woes for business.

loveguli

The rise of China as a global trading power is represented in this image of Shanghai, the world's busiest container port.

The rapid spread of the crisis emphasized the extent to which wealthier capitalist democracies had failed to develop and implement effective domestic financial regulations. At the same time, the extent to which many emerging economies were relatively unaffected emphasized how far they had gone in achieving their own momentum. Meanwhile, the persistence of poverty and economic dysfunction in numerous countries that had long before emerged from the unbalanced relationship inherent in colonialism underlined how much remained to be done to understand the dynamics of political economy.

Then came the breaking of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020, which quickly spread around the world and tested the abilities of governments and citizens to respond. Although multiple countries found their medical systems overwhelmed, others instituted lockdowns that contained the problem, and medical science rapidly produced several vaccines. However, the economic effects of the pandemic were felt in job losses, bankruptcies, and disruptions to trade and supply chains, and there was public resistance in many countries to both the lockdowns and the vaccines. New challenges were posed to our understanding both of politics and economics, raising questions that will take some time to answer.

Thanks to these developments, the study of political economy has undergone a resurgence in recent years, the dominant view today being that politics and economics have close connections, and that studying one without the other will result in a failure to produce an accurate understanding of how societies function. Political economy must take into account the contrasting dynamics of different economic and political systems, the impact of globalization on domestic and international policy decisions, and a wide range of more focused questions: for example, how rising consumer demand can be balanced against the

depletion of resources, how climate change is affecting politics and economics, how changes in patterns of production and the organization of the workplace relate to politics, how social class is impacted by political and economic decisions (see *Using Theory 18*), and how the different priorities of democratic and authoritarian regimes are shaped.

USING THEORY 18

CLASS THEORY

Class theory: A theory asserting that the class hierarchy – determined by the place of individuals in the production process – explains much about political consciousness.

While elite theory (see *Using Theory 9*) is based on the argument that society is divided into the few who rule and the vast majority who are ruled, **class theory** is based on the idea that societies are divided into classes with different political, economic, and social situations and interests. Founded on Karl Marx's idea that the power structure *is* the class structure, class is one of the most controversial of all the competing approaches to understanding government and politics.

The noun *class* can be defined broadly as a category or a set of ideas, items, phenomena, beings, or objects that have features or attributes in common, and that sets them aside from other classes. When applied to politics and society, it usually describes a group of people with qualities that make them distinctive from others, and that help drive their political choices and their interactions with other classes (see discussion about social class in Chapter 13). The assumption is that they will know who they are – or will be told by society who they are – based on characteristics such as their jobs, their level of education, their level of wealth, their ownership of property, the neighbourhoods within which they live, and the people they associate with. Among the many problems with the idea of class, though, is that not everyone fits neatly into a category, that there are disagreements even about such core terms as *middle class*, and that class structures vary from one society to another, while some societies are completely unaware of the concept of class.

Having expressed all these doubts, though, class appears regularly in the other chapters of this book: it is part of the discussion about modernization, declining political trust, professional politicians, voter choice, and changing patterns of support for political parties. It is clearly important, then, even if many of the scholars who have written about class have gone to great lengths to avoid actually defining what they mean by the term.

Although efforts have been made to reduce class differences in Britain, the government Office for National Statistics still recognizes several different occupationally related class categories, ranging from professional and managerial to 'semi-routine occupations'. Meanwhile, many Britons continue to classify each other based on a combination of occupation, education, and social background, and class still crops up in analyses of economics and of political choice and behaviour. Much the same is true in India, with its ancient and complex caste system (see Chapter 6). On the one hand, Corbridge et al. (2013) argue that Indian caste differences have weakened as they have intersected with other divisions, such as those based on wealth and gender. On the other hand, Jodkha (2018) suggests that caste is more 'active and agile' than ever before, while Banerjee and Ghosh (2019) describe it as 'ubiquitous in the everyday experiences of India'.

COMPARATIVE POLITICAL ECONOMY

Coming to grips with political economy demands an appreciation of the different perspectives on how markets work, of how they interact with politics and society, and of how they are best managed. A helpful guide through the maze is offered by Clark (2016), who identifies four major perspectives on the confluence between politics and economics, each based on different views about the interests of individuals and societies, and of the appropriate role of government. (A fifth perspective, known as state capitalism, is addressed later in the chapter. See the summary of all five in Figure 18.2.)

Classical liberalism

This is the original approach to political economy, its roots dating back to the origins of modern **capitalism** in the fourteenth century. The core idea here – as noted earlier – is that humans will do best, and society will most likely flourish, if individuals are allowed to pursue their own interests with minimal intervention from government. In this view, humans are seen to be self-interested and capable of identifying and pursuing the means best suited to meeting their needs. The free market is the best means for encouraging new discoveries and creative solutions to problems, and society is no more than an accumulation of individuals and their needs. Government serves to protect the natural rights of individuals, to offer public services such as education, and to address inequalities created by the market, but otherwise the ideal is a **night-watchman state**.

Capitalism: An economic principle based on leaving as many decisions as possible on production, distribution, and prices to the free market.

Night-watchman state: One which performs limited functions, such as maintaining law and order, providing national defence, and enforcing contracts.

Classical liberalism was dealt a severe blow with the Great Depression of the 1930s, the effects of which seemed to suggest that the market was not a level playing field, and that powerful economic interests exerted great political influence. Critics also charged it with paying too little heed to the idea of community welfare, including good education, health care, and infrastructure, most of which was better provided by the state. As a result, the peace achieved after

Perspective	*Main features*
Classical liberalism	Individuals should be allowed to pursue their interests with minimal intervention from government. Reborn in the 1980s as neoliberalism.
Radicalism	Government intervention is essential in the interests of ensuring equality and justice. Fell out of favour after its association with Marxism, Leninism, Stalinism, and Maoism.
Economic nationalism	Government should place the needs and priorities of national economies above those of others. Also known as protectionism.
Modern liberalism	Government should protect rights, and also redistribute wealth and opportunity. Popular today in many democracies.
State capitalism	Government should take responsibility for many of the functions of the free market. Recent growth in many authoritarian regimes.

Figure 18.2 Five perspectives on political economy

World War II brought a resurgence of government activity in the form of more regulation, and more investments by states in education, health care, and social welfare.

A reaction against this expansion of the state came in the 1980s when – under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the United States – classical liberalism was reborn as **neoliberalism**, an approach to political economy defined by Harvey (2007) as one in which 'human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills with an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade'. Neoliberalism has often been criticized, though, as 'capitalism without a conscience', and for focusing too much on profit and growth at the expense of economic and political equality, and social welfare (see Monbiot, 2016).

Neoliberalism: An economic philosophy representing a revival of classical liberalism that has been adopted by conservatives in many democracies since the 1980s.

Radicalism

The core idea behind the radical perspective is that society is more than a collection of individuals, that government represents their collective interests, and that democratic government intervention in the marketplace is essential to ensuring equality and justice. Early radical thought was sparked by industrialization in Western Europe and the visible problems and inequalities it created, and was based on the argument that society would benefit from trade unions, a minimum wage, and welfare, all of which could only be guaranteed by government. The key contributors to this line of thought included Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Karl Marx, and Lenin.

Rousseau (1712–78) wrote of inequalities in wealth that allowed some property owners to dominate others, and of the importance of everyone participating in politics so that personal interests could be blended with public interests. For Marx (1818–83), meanwhile, capitalism was a necessary stage on the road to **communism**, because it created a class consciousness that would lead eventually to revolution. This would result in the overthrow of the capitalist system, its replacement with a new communist system, and the 'withering away of the state' (see Boucher, 2014). In the event, the revolution predicted by Marx was 'forced' by Lenin and his Russian Bolsheviks, and came not in advanced industrial countries but instead in less advanced countries such as Russia and China.

Communism: An ideological position which suggests that a class war will lead to power and property being held in common, with the state withering away.

True communism was achieved nowhere. Instead, the Soviet Union saw the emergence of **state socialism**, most immediately associated with the Stalin years (1928–53). There was large-scale state intervention in the economy, the elimination of the formal free market and competition, state ownership of property, the creation of state-owned monopolies, and the use of a centrally planned **command economy** in which large government departments used quotas, price controls, subsidies, and five-year plans to decide what would be produced, where and when it would be produced, how it would be distributed, and at what prices it would be sold. Economic control was accompanied by the centralization of political authority, government by a single political party supported by a large bureaucracy, and little respect for individual rights.

State socialism: The political system found in 'communist' states, involving wholesale centralization of political and economic control.

Command economy: An economic system in which all decisions about production, supply, and costs are made by government planners.

The brutality and inefficiency of the Stalin era was not what radicals had in mind, and nor was its later equivalent in China under the leadership of Mao Zedong (1949–76). Mao's contribution was to rethink Marxism–Leninism for agricultural and peasant societies and to develop a populist and anti-elitist form of Marxism that inspired nationalist movements in parts of Africa and Latin America. Although state socialism has mainly disappeared (sometimes to be replaced by state capitalism – see section on authoritarian regimes), Marxian ideas remain relevant to understanding how capitalism works, or does not work.

Economic nationalism

This perspective supports a focus on the domestic economy in the national interest, and on building that economy in such a way as to keep as much economic activity as possible within national borders. It is critical of globalization and free trade, and supports controls on trade as well as restrictions on the movement of labour, capital, and goods. Tracing its heritage back to the mercantilism found in several European states from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, its critics charge that while it might help build national industries and corporations, it also creates protected markets that allow producers to raise prices, shields them from competition, and encourages reciprocal protectionism from other countries.

The policies of the Trump administration in the United States offer a prominent recent example. Their principles were outlined in Donald Trump's inaugural address of January 2017 in which he made the following assertion:

> From this moment on, it's going to be America first. Every decision on trade, on taxes, on immigration, on foreign affairs, will be made to benefit American workers and American families. We must protect our borders from the ravages of other countries making our products, stealing our companies, and destroying our jobs.

Trump went on to pursue these ideas by imposing tariffs on trade with Canada, China, the European Union, and Mexico, many of them designed to protect the US steel and coal industries. In fact, they achieved little and arguably created more problems than they solved, perhaps leading to reduced US global influence.

Modern liberalism

Modern liberalism – often (and confusingly) described simply as liberalism, while known to some Europeans as social democracy – is an outgrowth of classical liberalism, integrating elements of radicalism (see Ryan, 2012). It recognizes the flaws in capitalism and democracy, but also regards both as valuable; the purpose of government, argue modern liberals, is to protect rights so that individuals can collectively pursue the goals that the free market cannot provide, while focusing on those activities that support the public interest. It is the form of political economy found most often today in most democracies.

Welfare economics: The branch of economics that focuses on the effect of the allocation of goods and services on overall social welfare.

A key part of its philosophy is found in **welfare economics**, which is based on the idea that while the free market might lead to economic efficiency, it often overlooks the needs of the poor and the disadvantaged. Governments should therefore be involved in redistributing wealth and opportunity, and providing education and health care, so as to maximize social welfare. This was long a popular idea, resulting in the creation of welfare states (see later in this chapter). Reactions have occurred, though, against so-called 'big government', feeding into declining faith and trust in government. As to what effect this has had on political economy, opinion is divided.

Convergence thesis: The idea that the political economies of high-income economies are adopting a common format based on a liberal, pro-market response while also restraining welfare spending and encouraging policies to expand the workforce.

One view, the **convergence thesis**, holds that advanced economies and welfare states are coalescing around the modern liberal idea, encouraged by an increasingly globalized economy. However, the evidence for this convergence is far from clear-cut (see Hay, 2020), and what we may actually be seeing is a fragmentation of perspectives on political economy: different leaders, parties, and governments espouse different views about the best economic policies to pursue, and about the appropriate role of government in the marketplace. Economic inequality continues to remain a problem everywhere (see *Exploring Problems 18*). Meanwhile, the debate over the best policies to pursue has been complicated by speculation about the possible effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on globalization, trade, working habits, and consumer habits, all of which might push the thinking on modern liberalism in new directions.

THE WELFARE STATE

Welfare state: One that makes provision through the law for those in need, such as the unemployed, the poor, the unwell, and the elderly.

Social security: A collective term for welfare programmes targeted at people with inadequate income, or no income, or in retirement.

For many, the **welfare state** is the major policy achievement of the democratic state, and the foundation of the advantages that democracies have in the fields of education, health care, and social development. Even as their economic fortunes ebb and flow, democracies still manage to maintain welfare programmes, which often account for the bulk of their national budgets. This is true even in the United States, where many people mistakenly believe that national defence is the biggest item on the federal budget. In fact, about 60 per cent of federal spending in the US is directed at programmes such as **social security**, unemployment benefits, public health care, and related programmes, compared to the 15 per cent that is spent on the military (Congressional Budget Office, 2024). In most of Europe, spending on welfare is also substantial, but in poorer states with smaller government budgets, welfare is seen differently, and is based less on government spending than on support from the community, the family, and charity.

The origins of the term *welfare state* date back to late nineteenth century Germany (Pierson and Leimgruber, 2010). In an effort to offset the influence both of socialist parties and the Catholic Church, Otto von Bismarck (Chancellor of the German Empire, 1871–90) pioneered compulsory social insurance schemes for risks such as accidents and illness, at least for industrial workers. Building on these foundations, other Western European states introduced and extended welfare, beginning with support for the poor and the unemployed, and then providing pensions, family allowances, and support for rural people and dependents of industrial workers. The transformation continued after World

EXPLORING PROBLEMS 18

IS ECONOMIC EQUALITY POSSIBLE?

The five major perspectives on political economy have all been driven by the core question of how best to manage economies so as to achieve economic equality, if we define the latter as equality of opportunity and wealth. By almost every measure, all five have failed: economic inequality has been a fact of life for as long as we have been able to measure opportunity and wealth, and while economic wealth has grown, the gap between the rich and the poor has become wider, not narrower.

- At the global level, as we saw in Chapter 3, the World Bank classifies about 40 per cent of the countries in the world as high income, about half as middle income, and the balance as low income. Those at the lower end of the high-income group have a per capita income 12 times greater than those at the higher end of the low income group.
- In the United States, someone is defined as poor if they live below a threshold established by the government: about $26,000 for a household of four, or about $13,000 for someone living alone. In India and South Africa, by contrast, someone is considered to be living in poverty if they earn less than $2 per day, while the World Bank has set the international poverty line at $1.90 per day, or just under $700 per year.
- Within countries, there are often dramatic differences in the wealth of individuals and communities, a problem captured in the concept of the '1 per cent' of people who control most of the wealth, property, and political power.

One way of measuring the efficiency of political systems is to ask how well they have done in moving towards achieving economic equality. An objective measure of this is the Gini coefficient, created in 1912 by the Italian statistician Corrado Gini, and based on the simple premise of giving a value of 0 to a state where everyone has equal income and a value of 100 to a (theoretical) state where one person owns all the wealth. National figures range from a low of about 20–30 in the Nordic countries and several Eastern European countries to highs in the range of 45 (Mexico), 53 (Brazil), and 63 (South Africa) (see Figure 18.3). Interestingly, despite their quite different sets of economic policies, China and the United States have almost identical levels of economic inequality. Eastern European states tend to have low levels of inequality because of the heritage of communism, while Western European states have similarly low levels of inequality because of the heritage of their welfare systems.

Given the persistence of these problems, many questions remain:

- What are the causes of economic inequality?
- Is it better for governments to step back and leave it to the market to resolve the problems?
- If government intervention is the best approach, how should that intervention work?
- Should we just accept inequality as a natural state of human affairs and work with it as best we can?

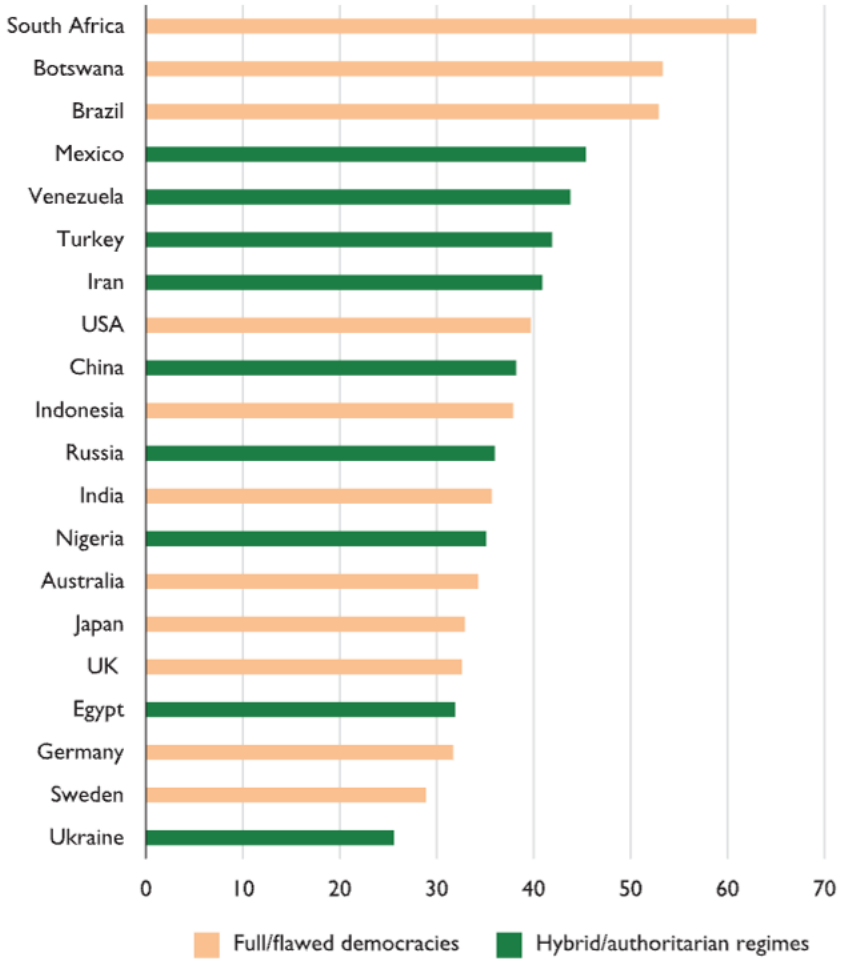

Figure 18.3 Comparing levels of inequality

Source: Based on World Bank (2024).

War II, such that by the 1970s virtually the entire populations of advanced democracies were covered for the main aspects of welfare (see Table 18.1), paid for mainly out of national government taxes.

The expansion took place at different rates at different times in different countries, resulting in today's different levels of spending (see Figure 18.4). Among the relatively wealthy members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the average share of spending by all public bodies (local as well as national) on social programmes was 21 per cent in 2022, although shares varied from a high of nearly 32 per cent in France to a low of 7.4 per cent in Mexico.

Like many concepts in government and politics, the welfare state is more often publicly debated in some countries than in others. It is most often discussed in Europe, where just as the region is the natural arena in which to study multi-party systems and coalition governments, so too is it the home of the most developed regimes of social support. Making sense of them is helped by applying an influential study by Esping-Andersen (1990), who identified three types of welfare state found in high-income democracies:

Table 18.1: Forms of welfare

■ Pensions for the retired
■ Unemployment benefits
■ Leave for new parents
■ Insurance against workplace accidents
■ Free or subsidized health care
■ Free or subsidized education
■ Support for people with disabilities
■ Subsidized housing
■ Family allowances
■ Social services (such as residential care homes)

- The liberal (or limited) welfare state. Here the rules for earning benefits are relatively strict and the benefits are relatively modest. Claimants are a small, workless, and sometimes stigmatized segment of the population. This is not so much a welfare state as state welfare – a tradition reflecting the night-watchman state. The main examples are found in the English-speaking world, notably Australia, Canada, and the United States.
- The conservative welfare state. Here the state is the main provider, but benefits are linked to occupation, depend on personal contributions, and reflect salary levels. Positions which serve the state, especially jobs in the bureaucracy, often receive generous treatment in health benefits and pensions. Reflecting the influence of the church, this system favours the family and encourages parenthood. It is found most often in continental Europe, with Germany being the classic case, and others including Austria, France, and Italy.

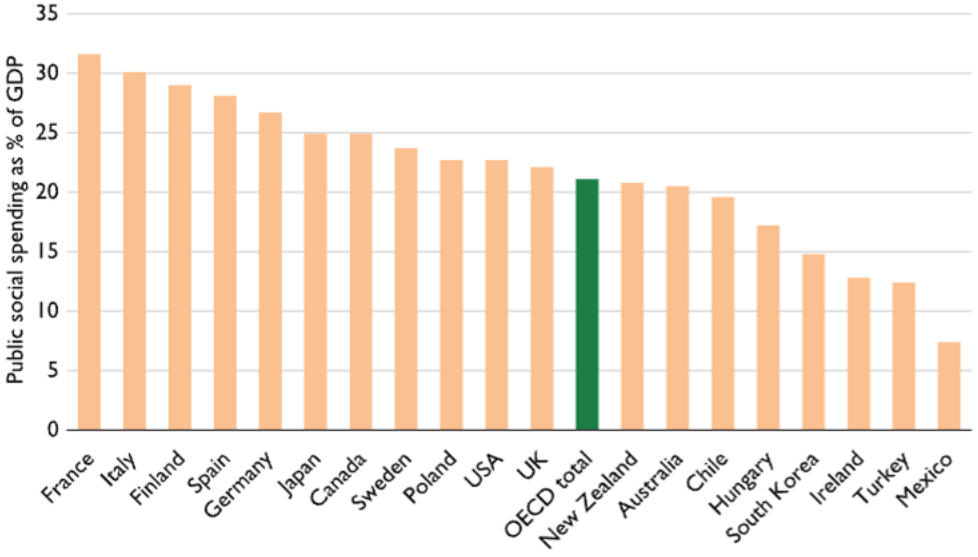

Figure 18.4 Comparing welfare spending

Source: Based on Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2024c). Figures are for 2022. Includes all financial flows from public bodies for social purposes. Does not include tax breaks or private spending, which would particularly increase figures for USA, UK, and Japan.

- The social democratic welfare state. This less common system is based on the principle of equal, flat rate benefits for all citizens. Based on need rather than contributions, it takes direct responsibility for caring for children and the elderly. Nordic countries are the best examples of this extensive, expensive, and egalitarian system, as illustrated by comparing Finland with the more limited welfare arrangements of Australia (see Table 18.2).

The demand for welfare has continued to grow in tandem with the growing average age of the population, raising costs and posing several challenges:

- Welfare states are based on open-ended commitments, with governments guaranteeing to help everyone who qualifies.
- International pressures are growing: if the cost of one country's welfare system is higher than the rest, either because it is more generous or because its population is growing (a trend that may be impacted by migration), then its international competitiveness may suffer.
- Asia's rise in the global economy comes with the advantage that its welfare systems are relatively inexpensive compared with the older and more expensive systems of Europe and North America.
- Many countries have found their welfare systems strained by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, with long-term effects that are still being played out.

These challenges have led to a limited retreat of the welfare state, with benefits being reduced, eligibility rules tightened (notably by raising the retirement

Table 18.2: Comparing the welfare state in Australia and Finland

Benefits	Australia	Finland
Public social spending	20.5% of GDP	29.0% of GDP
Health care	Universal and public.	Universal and public.
Parental benefits	12 weeks' paid leave within 12 months of birth or adoption.	15 weeks' paid leave for mothers (beginning up to 50 days before estimated due date), and 54 days for fathers after birth.
Unemploy-ment	Flat rate and means-tested. Recipients must be actively seeking work and be available for and willing to accept suitable work.	Flat rate and means-tested for 300–500 days, with allowances for dependent children.
Pensions	Means-tested from age 66.	From age 63–65, depending on year of birth, either earnings-related or a national pension if earnings too small.
Education	Public and private options.	Free, with limited private options.

Source: Government web sites of Australia and Finland, retrieved March 2024.

age), some charges being introduced for services such as medical treatment, and employment benefits being reduced for new and part-time workers. This edging away from a comprehensive welfare state has also reflected a general shift in government priorities, from the social to the economic. In particular, efforts to put people back to work have intensified as governments have tried to raise economic output – and tax revenues – so as to address their fiscal challenges, especially since the global financial crisis. Even as welfare spending has remained high, unemployment benefits have been reduced in many countries (Greve, 2020).

POLITICAL ECONOMY IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

This chapter opened by looking at the case of Botswana, a country that – with the help of sound political and economic decisions – has transformed itself from one of the poorest countries in the world to a middle-income economy. The story with its immediate neighbour – Zimbabwe – has been entirely different. Gaining independence in 1980, it inherited a diverse economy based mainly on minerals and agriculture, along with sound infrastructure and the foundations of a multi-party democracy. A combination of incompetence, corruption, and bad decisions has since run the economy into the ground, leading to hyperinflation and high unemployment, and leaving Zimbabwe with a per capita GDP less than one-fifth that of Botswana's (but, interestingly, a similar level of economic inequality). These decisions also helped undo Zimbabwe's democratic prospects, turning the country into an authoritarian regime on a par with Cuba, Myanmar, and Russia.

It might be assumed that just as authoritarian regimes use political means to keep control, so they also use economic means, and that both their political and their economic development suffers as a result. The picture is not that simple, though. True enough, dictators are usually less concerned than democrats with promoting the general welfare of citizens, and we often find authoritarian regimes – as in the case of Zimbabwe – blighted by privilege, nepotism, and corruption, and lagging economically. At the same time, some of the fastest-growing economies of recent years have been authoritarian regimes such as China, Ethiopia, Uganda, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam.

The challenges of understanding the links are illustrated by Haddad (2012) in his case study of Syria and of how political economy played into the Arab Spring. Criticizing the efforts made to frame the Arab uprisings in terms of 'generic economic arguments about poverty and destitution', and to see the uprisings as a reaction to decades of authoritarian rule, he argued the importance of assessing the role in these uprisings of the interaction between economic and political variables. He described the dynamic that played out in Syria as follows:

> When authoritarian elites began to build relations with capitalists or the business class in the 1970s and 1980s they were doing more than simply pursuing their own interests. They were trying to respond to growing economic troubles or crisis. However, with time, these political elites and their offspring were increasingly becoming the economic elite. Their interests were reflected in their policy preferences, their lifestyles, and their changing social alliances (if not tastes).

With new abilities to transform economic wealth into political power, Haddad continued, more state officials and their families in Syria were drawn into a 'crony-dominated market' in which economic policy was shaped by the mutual interests of business and the authoritarian government of Hafez al-Assad (in office 1971–2000) and his son Bashar al-Assad (in office since 2000). The pressures that helped to trigger the Syrian civil war in 2011, in other words, were about more than democrats versus dictators, and lay in a more nuanced set of factors related to political economy. The effects continue to be felt to the present: in 2022, Syria had a per capita GDP of just under $540, making it poorer than all but seven other countries (World Bank, 2024).

In many authoritarian regimes, the key challenge for dictators is to play off domestic political forces against one another so as to ensure their own continuation in power. Economic means play a key role in these efforts, and, as a result, coherent economic development usually suffers. The public sector often becomes bloated, as we saw in Chapter 10, with poorly paid employees trying to enrich themselves at the expense of business and citizens. A company's success, and its tax burden, comes to depend more on its political contacts than its business strengths. Economics and politics do not marry well under these circumstances, resulting in the inefficient use of capital. Even worse, rulers may just want to enrich themselves, their families, and their ethnic or religious group by taking resources out of the economy and often out of the country. Inherent corruption, among leading officials as well as bureaucrats dealing directly with the public, is a tax on both economic growth and regime legitimacy.

Resource curse: A phenomenon in which a state that is well endowed in a particular natural resource, or a limited selection of resources, experiences lower economic growth thanks to unbalanced policy, extensive corruption, and internal conflict.

The mismarriage of politics and economics is particularly acute when states suffer from a **resource curse** (Auty, 1993; Collier and Bannon, 2003), or a 'paradox of plenty' as it is sometimes known. This exists when a country is well endowed in a resource that could and should be the foundation for sound economic development, but instead alters the economic and political balance so as to focus attention on a single sector, undermining wider economic growth and social development.

Several wealthy democracies, such as Canada and Norway, have faced the risks of this problem (mainly because of their oil wealth) but have been able to avoid its worst effects by pursuing careful and transparent policies, and making sure to broaden the foundations of their economies. In the case of many poorer (and often authoritarian) countries, however, their rush to

exploit these resources has often produced different results. Oil has turned out to be a problem, for example, for several sub-Saharan African states, such as Angola, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Nigeria, and Sudan. The resource curse is also a factor in countries rich in easily exploitable minerals such as copper (Zambia) or uranium (Kazakhstan), or in valuable minerals such as cobalt. The latter is used in every lithium-ion rechargeable battery on earth, and more than 60 per cent of the world's supply comes from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The policy element of the 'curse' stems from four main factors:

- Because these resources are usually relatively easy to exploit and can bring quick and often profitable returns, a state will focus its development efforts almost entirely in that sector, investing little in other sectors. This is the so-called 'Dutch disease', named for the effects of the discovery of natural gas in the North Sea off the coast of the Netherlands in the 1970s (Humphreys et al., 2007). The result will be an imbalanced economy that will become dependent on a product whose value may be held hostage to fluctuations in its price on the international market.
- When a government can raise enough revenue from simply taxing a major natural resource, it lacks the incentive to improve economic performance by developing the skills of its people, thus damaging growth over the long run.
- The profits that come from these commodities can encourage theft and corruption, ensuring that they find their way into the bank accounts of the rich and powerful rather than being reinvested back into the economy and society. This is certainly at the heart of explanations for the problems of oil-rich Equatorial Guinea, which ranks at the lowest levels of the Corruption Perceptions Index (see Chapter 5). Despite making most of its income through oil exports, more than 70 per cent of the population still works in agriculture, much of it subsistence.
- The curse can encourage internal conflict, when poorer regions of the country find that they are not benefitting equally from the profits of resources found in other parts of the country, or when insurgencies and civil wars are funded by these resources. An example is found in the diamonds used to finance insurgents and warlords in Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sierra Leone, their association with violence earning them the label 'blood diamonds' (or conflict diamonds).

The political economy of authoritarianism takes on its most predictable structure in the form of **state capitalism**, where a state takes a more hands-on approach to economic management. It does this mainly through its ownership of state-owned enterprises (SOEs), which are large companies that control strategically important fields such as energy and technology. This is far from a new phenomenon, and it is not limited to authoritarian regimes; the British and Dutch East India Companies (founded, respectively, in 1600 and 1602) were among the original SOEs, state capitalism has been found at different times in France and

State capitalism: A system in which the state wields a high degree of control over the economy, taking responsibility for many of the functions and activities that would be left – in a capitalist system – to the free market.

Japan, and its principles can still be found at work in flawed democracies such as Brazil and India.

A fifth perspective on political economy to add to the four discussed earlier in this chapter, state capitalism has undergone a revival in recent decades in several hybrid and authoritarian regimes, including China, Russia, and Turkey (see *Spotlight 18* on Turkey at the end of this chapter). Kurlantzick (2016) points out that this trend has contributed to declines in democracy as governments have tightened their political control. State capitalism, he warns, is 'more protectionist, more dangerous to global security and prosperity, and more threatening to political freedom' than free market economics.

In the case of China, state capitalism has replaced a policy of privatization that was begun by Mao's successors in the 1980s with the creation of enormous SOEs such as Sinopec, State Grid, and China National Petroleum; in 2022, these three energy companies occupied three of the seven top slots on the *Fortune* Global 500 list of the world's biggest companies (*Fortune*, 2024). Helped by a law that requires that all industries of strategic value (such as energy and arms manufacturers) be owned by the state, such corporations have accounted for more than 80 per cent of the value of the Chinese stock market in recent years (Li, 2015). Although often inefficient, they have nonetheless helped China to become more competitive at a global level, while strengthening the grip of the Chinese Communist Party over the national economy.

Similar patterns can be found in Russia, where the share of the state sector – while unknown exactly – is much larger than the share found in free market democracies, and seems to be growing (Arshakuni and Yefimova-Trilling, 2019). Vladimir Putin, argues Djankov (2015), was long able to encourage state ownership of key sectors such as energy and finance, used Russia's exports of oil and natural gas as a tool in foreign policy, neglected to address the problem of extreme wealth accumulating in the hands of a growing number of billionaires with whom he has close links, and was able to weather sanctions imposed on Russia by the European Union and the United States, everything playing into Putin's style of strong and assertive leadership. The landscape changed following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, but while the Russian economy suffered from sanctions and the cost of the war, Putin's grip on power continued.

For Aslund (2017), Russia's SOEs – including the energy companies Gazprom and Rosneft, and the technology company Rostec – are little more than a cover for the development of the kind of crony capitalism discussed in Chapter 10. They give the impression of being run in the fashion of modern businesses, issuing annual reports and holding annual shareholder meetings, for example, but appearances deceive:

> They are not even really run by the state. Instead, they are controlled by a small group of cronies – former KGB officers, ministers, and senior officials in the president's administration – who act as Putin's personal representatives.

Loyal executives enjoy long tenures in these companies (regardless of their management abilities), managers favour friends and associates through the awarding of contracts and the selling of assets, and family members are appointed to senior positions regardless of age or experience. The result, Aslund suggests, is a form of 'neo-feudal capitalism' that poses a threat to Russia's social and political stability.

Another phenomenon found in many authoritarian regimes (as well as some democratic ones) is **rent-seeking** (von Seekamm, 2021). This might be pursued by an individual, a company, or even an entire regime. For example, governments might take over control of valuable natural resources (such as land) and charge citizens for their use, or they might require import licences for companies bringing new products into a country, or charge visitors fees for visas. Equally, government officials might take bribes to provide a licence to a company, or a passport to a citizen. In all these cases, resources are being used unproductively to generate unearned benefits, hidden taxes are imposed on the economy and society, and no value is added to the wider marketplace.

Rent-seeking: The use of a resource that results in the transfer of wealth, rather than the creation of new wealth or benefits to society.

For governments that encourage rent-seeking (Brazil, China, Hungary, and Poland have all been the subjects of recent studies), there is less motivation to set up the formal structures needed to collect taxes, expand the economy, and develop human capital. Rather, a stand-off of mutual distrust develops between rulers and ruled, creating a context which is incompatible with the more sophisticated policy initiatives found in many democracies. Rent-seeking is related to the phenomenon of the **rentier state**. In economic terms, the rentier state makes money from owning an asset which it exports, usually through licensing private and often foreign contractors, making a profit but adding little value to the local economy. For example, agricultural commodities may be exported raw, with processing taking place elsewhere.

Rentier state: One which earns most or all of its national revenues from exporting raw materials or leasing natural resources to foreign companies.

The authoritarian rulers of these rentier states receive a direct income from overseas, reducing their need to raise taxes, and reducing pressures for representation. A portion of the resource 'rent' can be distributed to the population as hand-outs or through providing jobs in a swollen public sector, thus buying popular acquiescence to a non-democratic regime, and delaying a transition to democracy. The phenomenon of the rentier state is one of the explanations for the lack of democracy in many states rich in key resources such as oil.

Most of the major Middle Eastern oil states – including Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states – have at various times earned the label *rentier state*. This has applied most obviously at times when the global price of oil has been high, though, and the long-term decline in the place of oil in the world economy may be having important implications for Saudi Arabia, among others. Its recent budget deficits have been exacerbated by the falling price of oil, encouraging the government to cut subsidies, to impose its first-ever general tax (in the form of a value added tax), and even to think about privatizing Aramco, the world's largest oil company. The long-term result, suggests Seznec (2016), might be that Saudi Arabia's political economy moves away from being 'the epitome of

a rentier state' and instead begins to resemble those of more advanced industrial democracies.

In summary, understanding authoritarian regimes (and democracies) is not just about understanding the political relationships between governments and citizens, but also the economic relationships. With the deepening and widening of authoritarian ideas, and the expanding impact of globalization, understanding the dynamics of political economy in authoritarian regimes is becoming increasingly important. This is true not only for the insights it gives us into government and politics in authoritarian regimes, but also the insight it provides into the foothold being gained by populist and nationalist ideas about the economy in multiple democracies.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What are the key benefits of studying the interaction between politics and economics?
- To what extent are classical liberal views still reflected in the modern practice of political economy in democracies?
- To what extent are radical views still reflected in the modern practice of political economy?
- What is the future likely to hold for the welfare state?
- What are the differences between state socialism and state capitalism?
- Why have well-endowed democracies managed to avoid the effects of the resource curse, while many authoritarian systems have not?

KEY CONCEPTS

- Capitalism
- Class theory
- Command economy
- Communism
- Convergence thesis
- Dependency theory
- Development
- Economic system
- Economics
- Fair trade
- Free trade
- Global financial crisis
- Markets
- Neoliberalism
- Night-watchman state
- Political economy
- Rent-seeking
- Rentier state
- Resource curse
- Social security
- State capitalism
- State socialism
- Welfare economics
- Welfare state

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SPOTLIGHT 18
TURKEY

PROFILE

Once the centre of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey is a secular republic that straddles Asia and Europe. It has long sought membership of the European Union, but its efforts have stalled over concerns about its human rights record and democratic trajectory. Matters have worsened in recent years under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who came to power in 2003 and spent 11 years as prime minister before being elected president in 2014 and set about converting the previously ceremonial role of the office into an executive position with strong powers. An attempted coup in 2016 sparked a crackdown that strengthened Erdoğan's powers, and a flawed 2017 referendum narrowly approved a switch to a presidential system of government. Erdoğan was re-elected in 2018 and again in 2023. Along the way, Freedom House downgraded Turkey from Partly Free to Not Free, concerned about abuses of free expression, freedom of association, and the rule of law.

Form of government	Unitary presidential republic. State formed in 1923. The 1982 constitution was the sixth since 1876, and it has been amended nearly 20 times.
Executive	Presidential. A president is directly elected for no more than two five-year terms, supported by several vice-presidents and a Council of Ministers.
Legislature	Unicameral Grand National Assembly with 600 members elected for renewable four-year terms.
Judiciary	Constitutional Court with 17 members serving non-renewable 12-year terms, with three elected by the Grand National Assembly and the rest appointed by the president based on nominations from lower courts.
Electoral system	The Grand National Assembly is elected using proportional representation with a (relatively high) 10 per cent threshold. The president has been directly elected only since 2014. Presidential candidates must be nominated by at least 20 members of the Grand National Assembly and compete against each other using a majority system.
Parties	Dominant party. Conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) (formed in 2001 out of several other conservative parties) has dominated recent elections.
Population	85 million
Gross Domestic Product	$907 billion
Per capita GDP	$10,674
Democracy Index rating	Hybrid
Freedom House rating	Not Free
Corruption score	34/100
Human Development Index rating	Very High

CASE STUDY: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF TURKEY

Turkey is an emerging economy that occupies an important strategic position between Europe and the Middle East. With a population almost as big as that of Germany, it has seen steady economic growth in recent years, quickly recovering from the effects of the global financial crisis, making significant inroads into its poverty rate, witnessing rapid urban growth, and earning a ranking by the World Bank as an upper-middle-income country (on a par with China, Brazil, and Mexico). There has been speculation that Turkey could join the BRICS group, and the International Monetary Fund classifies it as an emerging market economy, or one that has some but not all of the economic features of a developed economy. In short, Turkey's economic potential is significant.

dia images / Contributor

Crowds of shoppers in Istanbul exemplify the economic and urban growth that has recently come to Turkey, an emerging market economy with significant economic potential.

Questions hover, though, over the trajectory of its political economy. Turkey had been moving towards strengthening its democratic credentials, and making efforts to amend laws and regulations in the interests of its long-held hope of joining the European Union. Since coming to power in 2003, however, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has undone many of the democratic gains, accumulating new powers for a redesigned presidency, and pursuing a policy platform that has been variously described as populist, nationalist, Islamist, conservative, and anti-Western. The political doubts raised by his administration have raised economic doubts as well.

Many have seen signs of neoliberalism in Turkey, reflected, for example, in a policy of privatization, and a move away from an already modest welfare state towards greater support for private health care and private social insurance. However, Kutlay (2019) speculates that Russia and China may be leading a trend in other countries towards state capitalism, in which Turkey has become involved. He sees its ruling elite as supporting a move away from a Western-oriented liberal model towards a variety of state capitalism. This would seem to fit with the creation of closed elite political business cartels, and Turkey's persistent problems with corruption. There is, in short, an unsurprising overlap between current political and economic trends in Turkey.

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Index

Boldface page numbers indicate key references and the location of the definitions of key terms.

A

absolute monarchy **117–19**
abstract review **170–1**
Acton, Lord 8, 124
affirmative action **250–1**
Afghanistan 18, 286, 390
Arab Spring 91, 108, 116, 206, 312–13, 424, 469
Argentina 3, 113, 227, 332, 356
Aristotle 4, 16, 20, 32
artificial intelligence 74, 294, **307**, 309, 408
Australia 15, 135, 167, 223, 247, 248, 280–1, 301, 358–9, 385, 468
Austria 170, 360
authoritarian regime **111–12**
authoritarian rule **107–8**
  absolute monarchy **117–19**
  autocracy **111**, 114
  autocratization **114–15**, 115–16
  bureaucratic authoritarianism **255**
  coercion **112**, 337, 442, 444
  consultative authoritarianism **230**
  containment of 129
  co-option **229–30**, 366
  corruption in 123, 256–7
  cult of personality 115, **120**
  despotism 98, **116**, 205
  dictatorship **107**, 111, 116, 128–9, 229, 391
  digital authoritarianism **313**
  divine right **113**
  electoral authoritarianism **366**, 367, 369
  executives 185, **203–8**
  forms of authoritarian rule 116–23
  future of 126–30
  hybrid regimes **109–11**
  military rule 19, 112, 113, 115, **122–3**, 176, 177–8, 203, 204, 207, 446
  origins and evolution 113–16
  patronage 105, **112**, 124, 126, 154, 283, 338, 339, 399, 419, 428, 444
  personalism **120**, 205, 446
  presidential monarchy **119–21**, 204, 205, 232
  regime types 108–12
  ruling party **121–2**, 178, 229, 232, 283, 366, 392
  totalitarianism 108, **113**, 115, 120
authority **18–19**
autocracy **111**, 114
autocratization **114–15**, 115–16
Azerbaijan 15, 365

B

ballot stuffing **369**
behaviouralism **32**, 33, **348**
Belarus 15, 120
Belgium 71, 195, 272–3, 364
bicameralism **216–17**, 218
  strong bicameralism **217**
  weak bicameralism **217**
bill of rights **163**, 183
Bolivia 113
Bolsonaro, Jair 92, 145, 263
Botswana 40, 453, 469
Brazil 333
  and BRICS 67
  executive 211
  federalism 263, 276, 431
  legislature 219–20
  political parties 386–7, 431
  vote buying in 332
  women in legislature 227
  Spotlight 210–11
BRICS countries 67, 210, 455, 458, 477
Britain, *see* United Kingdom
Brunei 365
bureaucracies **237–40**
  accountability 241
  administrative capacity **257**
  affirmative action **250–1**
  bureaucratic authoritarianism **255**
  crony capitalism **256**, 472
  department **246–7**
  departmental recruitment **250**
  developmental state **255**
  division **247–8**
  e-government **244–6**
  in authoritarian regimes 253–8
  meritocracy **242**
  new public management **244**
  non-departmental public body **248–9**
  ombudsman 49, **241**
  organization of 246–50
  origins and evolution 242–6
  outsourcing 237, **243**, 244, 278
  political control 247
  predatory state 253, **256**, 257
  public administration **237**, 242, 244
  recruitment 250–3
  red tape **238**
  regulatory agency **249–50**
  spoils system **243**
  unified recruitment **250**
  Weber's model of 242
  whistleblowing **240**
  women in 251, 253
Burke, Edmund 221
Burkina Faso 228
Burma, *see* Myanmar
Burundi 68

C

cabinets 194, **196**, 198, 199, 246–7
cadre party **378**
capitalism 31, **461**, 462
  crony capitalism **256**, 472
  state capitalism **471–2**, 477
Canada 141, 169, 195–6, 218, 223, 243, 351, 410–11, 437–8
career politician **225**
cartel party **390**
case study method **36–40**
catch-all party **378–9**
censure motion 200, **223–4**
Chad 203
checks and balances **96**, 169, 185
Chile 161
China
  as authoritarian state 127, 133
  as unitary state 40, 271, 281–2
  bureaucracy 242, 255–6
  Chinese Communist Party 15, 121, 133, 173, 178, 206, 282, 335, 366, **383**, 419, 431, 447, 472
  constitution and courts 173, 178–9
  elections 366
  executive 206–7

and Hong Kong 15, 335, 422
interest groups 406, 419–20, 421
judiciary 173–4
legislature 230–1
media 311
nationalism 72
political economy 463, 472
political trust 147
power 17, 226
public policy 427, 431, 445–6, 447
Spotlight 132–3
sub-national government 264, 270, 281–2
Churchill, Winston 86, 112, 346
citizenship **57**, 323
civic culture **140**, 143, 144, 145, 147, 151
civil liberties 83, 84, 92, **98**, 108, 179
civil rights **98**
civil service, *see* bureaucracy
civil society **402**, 417–18, 419, 420, 421, 422
class theory **460**
clicktivism 94, **325**, 326, 405
clientelism 283, **339**, 395
coalition government 6, 39, **194–5**, 220, 350, 352, 446
coercion **112**, 337, 442, 444
cohabitation **200**
Cold War 4, 21, 32, 33, 87, 99, 113, 114, 458
command economy 115, **462**
communism 21, 43, 91, 157, 206, 447, 458, **462**
communist political parties 121, 383
interest groups under 419
comparative politics **4**, 5, 29–31
benefits of 7
challenges of 44–50
choosing cases 36–40
comparative method **29**
critical thinking **29**, 30
empirical approach **30–1**, 140
global approach 5
and globalization 48–50
level of analysis **36**
methods of comparison 40–4
normative approach **30–1**
origins and evolution 31–6
purposes of 6–12
selection bias **45**, 47
and theory 10
unit of analysis **36**
comparative rankings
Corruption Perceptions Index 123, **125**, 126, 147, 154, 255, 471
Democracy Index x, 21, 42, 81, 82–3, 84–7, 92, 99, 107, 109–12, 126–8, 321, 437–8
Ease of Doing Business Index **441**
Fragile States Index 76
Freedom House/*Freedom in the World* x, 21, 81, 84, 91–2, 100, 101, 108, 126, 307, 311–12, 321, 417
Human Development Index **24**
Index of Economic Freedom 455
KOF Globalization Index **48**, 49
Worldwide Governance Indicators 238–9, 253, 254
confirmation bias **45**
constitutional courts, *see courts*
constitutional monarchy 117, **189**
constitutions **161–3**
amendments 161, 165, 166–7, 177, 180, 358
in authoritarian regimes 175–80
bill of rights **163**, 183
codified 96, **163**
entrenchment **166**, 167
eternity clause **167**
flexible **166**
martial law **176**, 177, 178, 232
origins and evolution 163–7
performance 165–6
rigid **166**
state of emergency **176**, 177
uncodified **163**, 235
consultative authoritarianism **230**
convergence thesis **464**
co-option **229–30**, 366
corporatism **416–17**, 419, 420
corruption 8, 109, **123–6**, 147, 205–6, 256, 258, 411, 469, 470, 471
Africa 153–4
China 207, 230, 256
Kenya 253
Mexico 399
Nigeria 27, 255
South Africa 145, 183, 384
Corruption Perceptions Index 123, **125**, 126, 147, 154, 255, 471
cost-benefit analysis **432**
Costa Rica 8, 291
council of ministers, *see* cabinets
counterfactual **43–4**
coup d'état 19, 107, 113, 115, 120, **122–3**, 207, 422, 446
courts 167–71
abstract review **170–1**
appellate **170**
in authoritarian regimes 175–80
cassation **168**
concrete review **169–70**, 171
constitutional courts 168, 169, **170–1**
judicial review 167, **168–9**, 170, 171
judiciary 108, **168**, 172–5
original jurisdiction **170**
supreme courts 96, 165, 168, **169–70**, 171, 172, 174
Covid-19 12, 18, 45, 67, 72, 74, 127, 145, 148, 176, 223, 263, 264, 311, 394, 459, 464, 468
critical thinking **29**, 30
crony capitalism **256**, 472
Cuba 43, 419
cult of personality 115, **120**
cultural theory **141**

D

Dahl, Robert 32, 81–2, 291
de facto states **69**
Democracy Index x, 21, 42, 81, 82–3, 84–7, 92, 99, 107, 109–12, 126–8, 321, **437–8**
democratic rule **81–3**
checks and balances **96**, 169, 185
civil liberties 83, 84, 92, **98**, 108, 179
civil rights **98**
consolidated democracy 84, 97
democratization 33–4, 35, **89–90**, 114, 128, 168, 232
direct democracy 82, **93–4**, 358
e-democracy **94**
electoral democracy 84, 152
flawed democracy **87**
forms of democratic rule 93–7
full democracy **84–5**
future of 99–102
illiberal democracy 93, **96–7**
improving performance of 86
liberal democracy **95–6**, 97, 101–2
liberalism **95**, 96
limited government **95**
origins and evolution 87–92
polyarchy **82**
public sphere **94**, 303, 312, 402
representative democracy 88, 93, **94–5**, 225
and rights 98–9
rule of law **82**, 84, 95, 96, 109, 162–3, 179, 230
regime types 84–7
structural violence **99**
democratization 33–4, 35, **89–90**, 114, 128, 168, 232
waves of 87–91, 113, 115, 216
Denmark 126, 195, 386

dependency theory **457**
despotism 98, **116**, 205
development 33, 34, 257, 268, 440, 447, **457**, 469, 470, 471
  Human Development Index **24**
developmental state **255**
dictatorship **107**, 111, 116, 128–9, 229, 391
digital activism **322–3**, 325, 326, 405
digital authoritarianism **313**
direct democracy 82, **93–4**, 358
disinformation 92, **291**, 302, 305, 307, 311, 333, 360
divine right **113**

E

Ease of Doing Business Index **441**
echo chamber **304–5**, 333
  economic nationalism 453, **463**
  economic systems 22–3, **455**
  economics, *see* political economy
Ecuador 185, 228
Edelman Trust Barometer 146, 303–4
e-democracy **94**
education policy 11–12, 142, 265–6, 432, 434
e-government **244–6**
Egypt
  and Arab Spring 91, 206
  elections 367
  emergencies and martial law 176–7
  executive 206
  interest groups 425
  legislature 231–2
  military 91, 122
  political parties 122
  Spotlight 424–5
  voter turnout 367–8
elections 347–9
  in authoritarian regimes 365–70
  distribution requirements **357**
  electoral authoritarianism **366**, 367, 369
  electoral formula **349**
  executive 356–8
  gerrymandering 87, 222, 349, 373, 385
  initiatives **360**
  legislative 350–5
  mandate 55, 86, 204, **356**, 361, 375
  primary elections **389**
  recalls **224**
  see also referendums, voters/voting
electoral fraud 89, 124, **348–9**, 368, 369, 370
  ballot stuffing **369**
electoral systems **349**
  alternative vote 354
  instant runoff 354
  majority systems 354
  mixed systems 354–5
  proportional representation 9, 30, 222, 227, **352–3**, 363, 389
  single-member plurality **351–2**, 363, 385, 389
  single non-transferable vote 352
  single transferable vote 353
elites 92, **137**, 225, 302, 337
  authoritarian 107, 114, 121, 122, 150, 152, 229, 230, 431, 444, 445, 470
  bureaucratic 250, 253, 255, 256, 258
  political culture **137**
elite theory **226**
emergency, state of **176**, 177
end of history 99–100
England, *see* United Kingdom
Equatorial Guinea 119, 256–7, 370, 471
Ethiopia 63, 285, 308, 422
European Union
  and states of Europe 79
  Brexit referendum 73, 79, 241, 335, 358
  bureaucracy 241, 247
  and climate change 427, 429, 440
  elitism 137
  federalism 79, 275
  foreign military operations 38
  governance 14, 275
  green parties 44–5
  and Hungary 143
  immigration 73, 143
  interest groups 416
  multi-level governance 265
  multinationalism 71
  referendums 359
  regulations 249–50
  regionalism 270
  Spotlight 78–9
executives **185–90**
  authoritarian **203–8**
  in authoritarian regimes 203–8
  cabinets 194, **196**, 198, 199, 246–7
  coalition government 6, 39, **194–5**, 220, 350, 352, 446
  constitutional monarchy 117, **189**
  elections 356–8
  head of government **188**, 189, 191, 199, 207
  head of state 119, **186**, 188–9, 191, 193, 199, 207
  leadership 185, **186**, 187, 197, 206
  majority government 194, 223, 350
  military leaders 207
  minority government **195–6**, 222, 386
  most effective design 197
  parliamentary **193–8**
  presidential 188, **191–3**
  presidential monarchy **119–21**, 204, 205, 232
  republic **188–9**
  semi-presidential 189, **199–202**
  separation of powers 191, **192–3**, 220, 279–80
  term limits 193, 204
  women 189–90

F

failing state **75**, 239, 254, 256
fair trade **458**
federalism **270–6**
  federal system **263–4**
  cooperative **274**, 276
  dual **274**
  ethnic **272**, 285
  legislatures 219–20
  quasi-federation **276**
  subsidiarity **274–5**
  see also cases of Brazil, European Union, Germany, Nigeria, Russia, Switzerland, United States, and Venezuela
feminism **252**, 404
  governance feminism 252
Finland 6, 7, 39, 198, 327, 468
flawed democracy **87**
Fragile States Index 76
France
  bureaucracy 247, 250
  constitution 164
  elections 354, 356
  executive 199, 200
  French Constitutional Council 172
  legislature 218, 219
  media 294
  political parties 375
  post-materialism 142
  Spotlight 288–9
  unitary government 289
Freedom House/*Freedom in the World* x, 21, 81, 84, 91–2, 100, 101, 108, **126, 307, 311–12, 321, 417**
free trade **455–6**, 457, 458, 463
Fukuyama, Francis 99, 100
full democracy **84–5**

G

gendered institution **225**, *227*
Germany 72
  bureaucracy 248
  coalition governments 195
  constitution 167
  elections 355
  executive 196
  Federal Constitutional Court 171, 175
  federalism 167, 171, 274, 276
  interest groups 409
  political culture 142, 157
  political parties 355
  public policy 440
  Spotlight 156–7
  welfare state 464, 467
gerrymandering 87, 222, 349, 373, 385
global financial crisis 55, 67, 146, **458**, 469
globalization 9, 10, **48–50**, 73, 74, 75, 140, 294, 297, 456, 459, 463
governance **14**, 23, 87, 108, 120, 213, 224, 237, 242, 256
  governance feminism 252
  metropolitan 280–1
  multi-level **264–6**, 282, 285
  Worldwide Governance Indicators 238–9, 253, 254
government, defined **12–14**
  checks and balances **96**, 169, 185
  limited **95**
grand theory **33**
Greece 331
gross domestic product **23**
Guatemala 8, 228

H

Haiti 75, 254, 392, 442–3
head of government **188**, 189, 191, 199, 207
head of state 119, **186**, 188–9, 191, 193, 199, 207
historical method **43–4**
Hobbes, Thomas 13, 336
Honduras 8
Hong Kong 15, 335, 337, 422
Human Development Index **24**
human rights **98**, 99, 162, 172, 179–80, 229
Hungary 114, 143, 302–3
hybrid regime **109–11**

I

Iceland 71, 216
identity politics **139–40**
ideology 136, **380**
illiberal democracy 93, **96–7**
  impeachment 185, 191, 211, **224**
Index of Economic Freedom 455
India
  caste system 460
  democracy 105
  economy 40, 68
  elections 347, 348, 351
  executive 198
  federalism 276
  Hindu nationalism 73, 105
  local government 278–9
  political culture 138–9
  political parties 40, 388
  population 64
  Spotlight 104–5
  structural violence in 99
  studies of 29
  voter turnout 329
Indonesia 332
institution, defined **12**
institutionalism **168**, 430
institutionalization **168**, 204, 402
interest groups **401–3**
  advocacy **401**, 405, 421
  in authoritarian regimes 417–22
  civil society **402**, 417–18, 419, 420, 421, 422
  corporatism **416–17**, 419, 420
  density **414**
  dynamics of 412–17
  iron triangle **411**
  issue network **411**
  lobbying **406**, 410, 413
  non-governmental organizations 237, 278, 402, 406–7, 419–20
  origins and evolution 403–7
  peak association **409**
  pluralism **405**, 416
  promotional group **409**
  protective group **408**, 411
  social movements **402–3**, 404, 405, 422
  think tank **409**
  types and methods 407–12
internet **298**
  access 94, 245, 298, 338
  bots **305**, 306
  clicktivism 94, **325**, 326, 405
  digital activism **322–3**, 325, 326, 405
  digital authoritarianism **313–14**
  and disinformation 305, 306
  and e-democracy **94**
  e-government **244–6**
  monitoring/censorship 110, 308–9, 311, 313–14, 338
  net neutrality **302**
  and security state 74
  social media 39, 94, **298**, 299, 304–7, 311, 313, 326, 405, 412
  trolls 94, **305**, 307
interpretivism **59**, 293
Iran 36, 152
  constitution 167, 180
  courts 175
  elections 368
  executive 118–19, 186
  history 43, 53
  human rights 180
  political parties 362
  public protests 341–2
  Spotlight 52–3
  Supreme Leader 118–19, 368
  voter turnout 361
Ireland 416
iron law of oligarchy **8–9**
iron triangle **411**
Islam and politics 53, 119, 151–2, 180, 382
Israel 69–70, 169, 293, 353–4, 416
issue voter **332**
Italy 87, 165, 195, 213, 215, 218, 240

J

Jamaica 321
Japan
  bureaucracy 244, 247, 261
  developmental state 255
  elections 37, 354
  elite political culture 137–8
  interest groups 401, 411
  iron triangle 411
  nation-state 71
  political parties 37, 384
  political trust 147
  Spotlight 260–1
judicial review 167, **168–9**, 170, 171
judiciary 108, **168**, 172–5
  judicial activism **172**, 173
  judicial independence **173**, 174, 177
  judicial restraint **172**

K

Kenya 253, 339, 341, 391, 421
Kim Jong-Un 120–1, 310–11, 340
KOF Globalization Index **48**, 49
Korea, North 113, 120–1, 126, 310–11, 312, 340
Korea, South 99, 437
Kurds 71–2

L

leadership 151, 185, **186**, 187, 197, 206
leadership theories 187

legislatures **213–15**
in authoritarian regimes 213–14, 228–32
bicameral **216–17**, 218
career politician **225**
censure motion 200, **223–4**
chambers, number of 216–20
collective representation **230**
consultative authoritarianism **230**
control of governments 221–4
co-option **229–30**, 366
descriptive representation 221
elections 350–5
gendered institution **225**, 227
impeachment 185, 191, 211, **224**
and legislation 220
origins and evolution 216–20
oversight **222–3**
political class **225**
recall elections **224**
and representation 221, 222
representation, models of **221**, **224–5**
representatives 224–8
roles of 220–4
separation of powers 191, **192–3**, 220, 279–80
unicameral **216**, 217
women in 225, 227–8, 229
legitimacy **56**, 84, 101, 286, 310, 347, 414
liberal democracy **95–6**, 97, 101–2
liberalism
classical economic 453, 455, 457, **461–2**
modern economic 458, 463–4
neoliberalism **462**, 477
political **95**, 96
Libya 38, 205
limited government **95**
lobbying **406**, 410, 413
local government **277–81**
Locke, John 60
Lukes, Steven **17**
Luxembourg 68

M

Machiavelli, Niccolò 30, 336
Maduro, Nicolás 152, 177, 317, 417
majority government 194, 223, 350
Malaysia 124, 151, 189, 276
Mao Zedong 16, 132, 133, 463
martial law **176**, 177, 178, 232
Marx, Karl 31, 460, 462, 463
media 291–4
in authoritarian regimes 308–14
concentration **301–2**
digital authoritarianism **313**
disinformation 92, **291**, 302, 305, 307, 311, 333, 360
echo chamber **304–5**, 333
false news, protection from 306
manipulation of news 304–7
mass media **291**
media freedom 300–4
media impact 292–4
media theories **295**
misinformation 94, **291**, 305, 360
origins and evolution 294–9
political communication **291**, 293, 296, 297, 313
post-truth world **305**, 307
propaganda 295, 305, **310**, 311
self-selection **292**
see also internet, social media
Mexico
constitution 165
elections 356
federalism 276
media 301–2
political parties 399
Spotlight 398–9
term limits 222, 358
military rule 19, 112, 113, 115, **122–3**, 176, 177–8, 203, 204, 207, 446
Mill, John Stuart 71, 213, 336
minority government **195–6**, 222, 386
misinformation 94, **291**, 305, 360
mobilized participation **340**, 422
modern **34**
modernization **34–5**, 256, 460
monarchy
absolute **117–19**
constitutional 117, **189**
Mongolia 83
most different system **38**
most similar system **38**
Mugabe, Robert 120, 445
multiculturalism **138–9**, 141
multi-level governance **264–6**, 282, 285
Myanmar 176, 177–8, 307

N

nations **69–74**
multinational state 71
nation-state **71**
self-determination **70–1**, 72, 73
xenophobia 73, **143**
nationalism 49, **72–4**, 87, 139, 143, 378, 379
economic 453, **463**
nativism **73**
natural rights **60**, 461
neoliberalism **462**, 477
net neutrality **302**
Netherlands 198, 250, 416, 471
new institutionalism **168**
New Zealand 87, 126, 166, 223, 237, 244, 327, 415
Nicaragua 8
niche party **379**
Niger 19
Nigeria 115
bureaucracy 254–5
economy 27
elections 357, 369
federalism 43, 273
government and governance 27, 115
legislature 43
military government 115, 207, 254
political culture 48, 153
political parties 393
political violence 341
Spotlight 26–7
traditional rulers 283–4
non-governmental organizations 237, 278, 402, 406–7, 419–20
Norway 81, 83, 278

O

Obama, Barack 39, 357
ombudsman 49, **241**
outsourcing 237, **243**, 244, 278

P

Paine, Thomas 95
Pakistan 225
Palestine 69–70, 71, 293
Panama 8
paradox of participation **327**
partisan dealignment **376–7**
party systems, *see* political parties
patronage 105, **112**, 124, 126, 154, 283, 338, 339, 399, 419, 428, 444
patron-client relationship **339**
personalism **120**, 205, 446
personal rule 120, 122, 205–6
Philippines 356
Poland 96–7, 169
political class **225**
political cleavage **378**, 392
political communication, *see* media
political culture **135–7**
in authoritarian regimes 148–54
civic culture **140**, 143, 144, 145, 147, 151
cultural theory **141**
elite political culture **137–8**
identity politics **139–40**
multiculturalism **138–9**, 141

in Muslim societies 151–2
post-materialism 45, **142–3**
see also populism
political economy **453–5**
in authoritarian regimes 469–74
capitalism 31, **461**, 462
command economy 115, **462**
communism 21, 43, 91, 157, 206, 447, 458, **462**
comparative 461–4
convergence thesis **464**
crony capitalism **256**, 472
dependency theory **457**
development 33, 34, 257, 268, 440, 447, **457**, 469, 470, 471
economic equality 465
economic freedom 455–6
economic nationalism 453, **463**
economics, defined **454**
economic systems 22–3, **455**
fair trade **458**
free trade **455–6**, 457, 458, 463
global financial crisis 55, 67, 146, **458**, 469
markets **454**
modern liberalism 458, 463–4
neoliberalism **462**, 477
night-watchman state **461**, 467
origins and evolution 455–60
radicalism 462–3
rent-seeking **473**
rentier state **473–4**
resource curse 27, 256, **470**
social security 243, 446, **464**
state capitalism **471–2**, 477
state socialism **462–3**
welfare economics **464**
welfare state 243, 244, 451, 454, **464**, **466–9**
political exclusion **327**
political participation **321–3**
in authoritarian regimes 335–42
clicktivism 94, **325**, 326, 405
clientelism 283, **339**, 395
conventional **321**
digital activism **322–3**, 325, 326, 405
mobilized participation **340**, 422
paradox of participation **327**
patron-client relationship **339**
patterns and levels of 323–9
political exclusion **327**
political violence **341**
unconventional **321**
and women 327, 329
see also public opinion, voters/voting
political parties **375–8**
in authoritarian regimes 390–6
cadre party **378**
candidates 389
cartel party **390**
catch-all party **378–9**
dominant party systems **383–4**, 393, 444
finances 389–90
ideal number 387
ideology 136, **380**
iron law of oligarchy **8–9**
leadership 388–9
mass party **378**
multi-party systems 30, 198, 232, **385–8**, 399
niche party **379**
no-party systems **382**, 395
one-party systems 206, 230, **383**, 438, 444
organization 388–90
origins and evolution 378–82
partisan dealignment **376**
party identification 348, **376–7**
party systems **382**
political cleavage **378**, 392
primary elections **389**
ruling party **121–2**, 178, 229, 232, 283, 366, 392
two-party systems 376, **385**
political science, defined **3**
political system, defined **19–20**
political trust 101, **145–8**
political violence **341**
politics, defined **15–16**
polyarchy **82**
populism 3, 41, 92, 97, 139, **143–5**, 169, 173, 243, 302, 378, 379, 402, 418
post-materialism 45, **142–3**
post-truth world **305**, 307
power, defined **17–18**
predatory state 253, **256**, 257
presidential monarchy **119–21**, 204, 205, 232
presidents, *see* executives
prime ministers, *see* executives
propaganda 295, 305, **310**, 311
public administration **237**, 242, 244
public opinion 9, 140, 229, **333–5**
in authoritarian regimes 337
and interest groups 412
opinion polls **334**
sample surveys 185, **334**
uninformed citizens 335, **336**
public policy **427–31**
in authoritarian regimes 431, 435, 442–8
cost-benefit analysis **432–3**
garbage-can model **434**, 435
incremental model **434–5**
policy convergence **439–42**
policy cycle **428–9**, 448
policy diffusion **439**, 442
policy instruments 429
policy models 432–5
policy style **435–8**
rational model **432**
public sphere **94**, 303, 312, 402
Putin, Vladimir 99, 127, 151, **201–2**, 328, 344, 345, 420, 447–8
and bureaucracy 258
and elections 369
and legislature 232
and political economy 472
and sub-national government 284–5

Q

qualitative method **40–1**
quantitative method **41–2**
quasi-states **68–9**

R

race and politics 45, 139, 251
ranking systems, *see* comparative rankings
rational choice theory 33, 327, **328**, 362, 405
recall elections **224**
referendums **358–60**, 367, 370
Australia 15, 167
Chile 161
Italy 165, 213, 240
Russia 202
Spain 55
Switzerland 275, 358–9
Syria 116
Turkey 107, 476
UK 73, 234, 269, 335, 354, 360
regime, defined **19–20**
regional government **269–70**, 271
regional integration **71**, 79
rentier state **473–4**
rent-seeking **473**
representation, models of **221**, **224–5**
republic, defined **188**
research/research methods
case study method **36–40**
correlation **42–3**, 144
dependent variable **42**
historical **43–4**
independent variable **42**
methodology **36**
most different system **38**
most similar system **38**
outlier **43**
qualitative **40–1**

quantitative **41–2**
regression line **42–3**
variables 38, **42**, 44, 47
resource curse 27, 256, **470**
rule of law **82**, 84, 95, 96, 109, 162–3, 179, 230
Russia 19
bureaucracy 258
constitution 179
democracy 99, 127, 447
elections 369
executive 199, 201–2
federalism 258, 284–5
interest groups 420
invasion of Ukraine 18, 67, 101, 328, 448, 472
legislature 232
media 39, 307, 313
political culture 151
political economy 462, 472–3
political participation 345
political parties 393–4
Potemkin village 180
public policy 447
semi-presidential system 199, 201–2
Spotlight 544–5
voting 328
Rwanda 227

S

sample survey 33, 142, **334**, 337
Saudi Arabia 118, 214, 225, 365, 382, 387, 473–4
secularization **333**
security state **74**
selection bias **45**, 47
self-determination **70–1**, 72, 73
separation of powers 191, **192–3**, 220, 279–80
Singapore 239, 240, 348
social class **330**
class theory **460**
social media 39, 94, **298**, 299, 304–7, 311, 313, 326, 405, 412
social movements **402–3**, 404, 405, 422
social sciences **3–4**, 8, 10, 33, 267, 455
social security 243, 446, **464**
Somalia 68–9, 76, 123, 126, 365
South Africa
constitution 164, 183
deconcentration 268
executive 192
political parties 384
political trust 145
quasi-federation 276
Spotlight 182–3
sovereignty **55–6**, 58, 60, 70, 73, 263, 266, 268
Soviet Union/USSR 9, 33, 63, 87, 91, 97, 99, 115, 120, 151, 266, 369, 462
see also Russia
Spain 55, 268–9
spoils system **243**
Stalin, Joseph 115, 302, 462, 463
states **55–8**
citizenship **57**, 323
de facto states **69**
developmental state **255**
diversity of 64–9
failing state **75**, 239, 254, 256
future of 74–6
legitimacy **56**, 84, 101, 286, 310, 347, 414
multinational state **71**
nation-state **71**
origins and evolution 58–63
predatory state 253, **256**, 257
quasi-states **68–9**
security state **74**
sovereignty **55–6**, 58, 60, 70, 73, 263, 266, 268
Westphalian system **60**, 164
state capitalism **471–2**, 477
state socialism **462–3**
structuralism **430**
structural violence **99**
sub-national government 263–6
in authoritarian regimes 281–6
deconcentration **268**
delegation **268**
devolution **268–9**
federal systems **263–4, 270–6**
local government **277–81**
multi-level governance **264–6**, 282, 285
regional government **269–70**
traditional rulers **283–4**
unitary systems 217, **263–4**, 266–70, 275, 276, 284, 285, 289
urban government 264, 280–1
warlords 75, **285–6**, 471
subsidiarity **274–5**
supreme courts, *see* courts
Sweden 20, 228
constitution 163
minority governments 195
ombudsman 49, 241
party identification
political parties 377, 379, 381
public policy 451
Spotlight 450–1
sub-national government 268
votes of confidence 223
Switzerland 40, 64, 273, 275, 358–9, 360
Syria **116**, **148–50**, 469–70
systems theory **267**

T

Tanzania 311, 394–5
term limits 193, 204, 215, **222**, 357–8
terrorism 74, 165, 294, 341
Thailand 122
theoretical approaches **10**
autocratization **114–15**, 115–16
behaviouralism **32**, 33, **348**
class theory **460**
cultural theory **141**
democratization 33–4, 35, **89–90**, 114, 128, 168, 232
dependency **457**
elite theory **226**
feminism **252**, 404
grand theory **33**
ideology 136, **380**
institutionalism **168**, 430
interpretivism **59**, 293
leadership theories 187
media theories **295**
modernization **34–5**, 256, 460
new institutionalism **168**
pluralism **405**, 416
rational choice 33, 327, **328**, 362, 405
structuralism **430**
systems theory **267**
think tank **409**
Three Worlds system 21
totalitarianism 108, **113**, 115, 120
traditional rulers **283–4**
Trump, Donald 3, 74, 92, 145, 224, 228, 263, 328, 331, 357, 463
and media 302, 306
trust in government, *see* political trust
Tunisia 91, 361
Turkey 61
authoritarian qualities 107
bureaucracy 438
executive 186
political economy 472, 477
Spotlight 476–7
Turnout, *see* voter turnout
Tuvalu 29, 64, 66
typology, political **20–2**

U

Uganda 110
unitary systems 217, **263–4**, 266–70, 275, 276, 284, 285, 289
deconcentration **268**
delegation **268**
devolution **268–9**

United Arab Emirates 395–6
United Kingdom
  Brexit referendum 73, 79, 241, 328, 335, 358, 360
  bureaucracy 243, 247, 249, 250
  class differences 460
  colonialism 61, 69, 105, 153
  constitution 163, 167
  devolution 269
  elections 12, 334, 334
  electoral system 351, 354
  government 12, 96
  interest groups 404, 409
  and Iran 53
  majority government 194
  media 301
  monarchy 218
  multinationalism 71
  Parliament 40, 216, 217, 221, 223, 224, 235, 406
  partisan dealignment 376
  political culture 142
  political parties 379, 385, 388, 389
  political trust 147
  Spotlight 234–5
  unitary state 264
  voting 88–9
United Nations 14, 48, 49, 57, 58, 62, 72, 245, 264
United States
  bureaucracy 242, 243, 247, 249
  and climate change 427, 440
  constitution 163–4, 165–6, 271
  comparative politics 32, 33
  democracy 87, 89, 96, 129
  economic inequality 465
  elections 39, 373, 389
  Electoral College 357, 373
  elitism in 226, 331
  executive 49, 192, 214
  federalism 56, 96, 169, 219, 274
  gerrymandering 87, 222, 349, 373, 385
  global financial crisis 458
  impeachment 224
  interest groups 408, 409, 412
  iron triangle 411
  judicial activism 172
  judiciary 174
  legislature 215, 217, 219, 220, 222, 224, 228
  lobbying 18, 410
  media 39, 296–7, 302, 306
  nationalism 73
  political culture 135–6
  political parties 376, 385, 388
  public opinion 334
  race in politics 139, 141
  Spotlight 372–3
  Supreme Court 169, 170, 171, 172, 174, 360, 373
  trust in government 147–8
  voters/voting 89, 348, 373
  voter turnout 329, 363
  welfare state 464
urban government 264, 280–1
Uruguay 83

V

Venezuela 19
  Bolivarian revolution 152
  constitution/courts 177, 317
  federalism 285
  interest groups 417
  media 317
  political culture 152
  Spotlight 316–17
  voter turnout 361
Vietnam 230, 361, 366, 438
vote of confidence 192, 194, **223**
voters/voting 3, 8, 84, 86, **330–3**
  in authoritarian regimes 337, 366–8
  economic voting **331**
  electoral fraud 89, 124, **348–9**, 368, 369, 370
  gender voting 327, 329
  in India 347
  issue voting **332**
  mandatory voting 364
  and opinion polling 333–4
  and religion 333, 341
  representation 221, 349
  and social class 330
  uninformed voters 336
  in the United States 89, 348, 373
  vote buying 325, **331–2**, 338, 339, 349
  voter choice 41, 95, 328, 330–3
  voter turnout 38–9, 40, 324, 325, 327, **360–4**, 370
  women 87, 88–9, 327, 329
  see also electoral systems, party identification

W

warlords 75, **285–6**, 471
Weber, Max 19, 55, 241, 242, 244, 247
welfare economics **464**
welfare state 243, 244, 451, 454, **464**, **466–9**
Westphalian system **60**, 164
Women
  in Australia 135
  in bureaucracies 251, 253
  executives 189–90
  and feminism 252, 404
  and gendered institutions **225**
  gender quotas 225, 227–8
  inequality 101, 165
  in Jamaica 321
  in legislatures 225, 227–8, 229
  and political culture 139–40
  political participation 327, 329
  and structural violence 99
  voting 87, 88–9, 327, 329
  women's rights activism 404

X

xenophobia **73**, 143
Xi Jinping 43, 132, 178, 207, 256, 335

Y

Yemen 225, 254

Z

Zambia 284, 392, 394, 471
Zimbabwe 6, 120, 179–80, 340, 445, 469